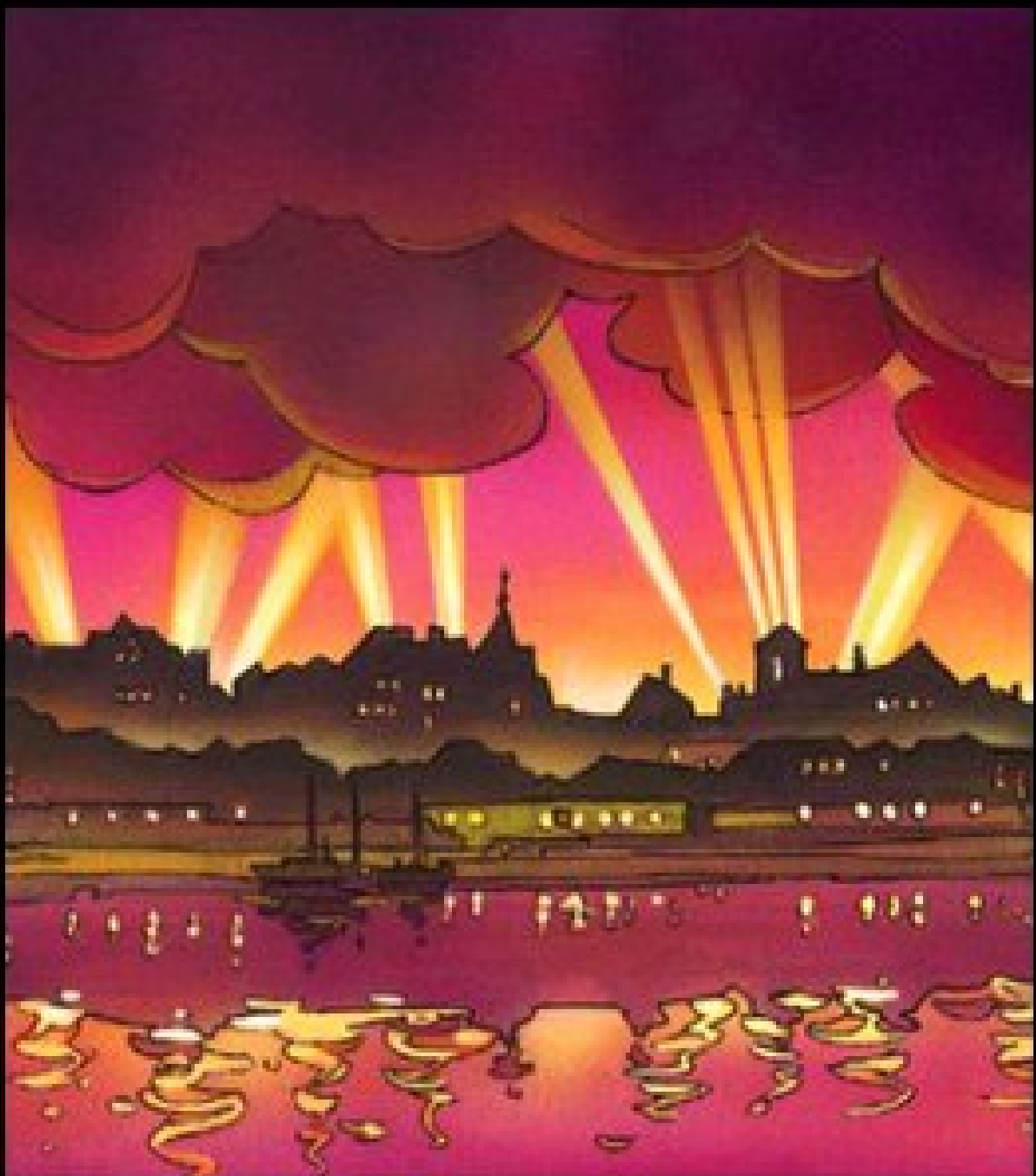


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF FIRE MOON

PART II: THE PATH OF DECEPTION





in

**THE SECRET
OF
FIRE MOON**

Part II: The Path of Deception

The main adversary in the search for the mysterious painting *Fire Moon*, is behind bars. However, he reveals very little, and still manages to dictate the game. The Three Investigators set out to search for the remaining clues to the painting, but it gets only worst for Jupiter as he is obsessed with solving the mystery. As usual, he insists on doing things his way, and comes up with a scheme that Pete describes as a 'very, very, very stupid idea'. This leads to a dangerous and breathtaking car chase on a wet and winding road.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of Fire Moon
Part II: The Path of Deception

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

*Die drei ???: Feuermund
Teil II: Der Pfad der Täuschung*

*(The Three ???: Fire Moon)
(Part II: The Path of Deception)*

*by
André Marx
(2005)*

*Cover art by
Silvia Christoph*

(2020-08-23)

Contents

- 1. Public Reaction**
- 2. The Silence of the Master Thief**
- 3. Hugenay's Story**
- 4. In a Fine Pickle**
- 5. No Traces in the Sand**
- 6. Getting Even**
- 7. Alarm!**
- 8. A Very, Very, Very Stupid Idea**
- 9. An Old Lady Gets Going**
- 10. In Search of Otto**
- 11 The Cover is Blown!**
- 12. Beauty or the Beast?**
- 13. A Question of Trust**
- 14. Stuck in the Mud**
- 15. The Nightmare**
- 16. Only a Legend**
- 17. 200th Anniversary Celebrations**
- 18. In League with the Devil**

1. Public Reaction

“Stop! Stop! Damn it, stop!” Titus Jones ran, arms outstretched, towards the huge dark green dump truck that had rolled into the salvage yard a minute ago. Now the driver was about to dump a monstrous mountain of scrap metal off the truck. But the man at the wheel seemed to neither hear nor see Uncle Titus. The dump body was tipped further and further by the hydraulics until the metre-high piled up scrap was about to slide down. Then finally Uncle Titus reached the truck and stood two metres away from the tail gate, waving his arms wildly.

The dump body stopped and tipped back into the starting position just when it was almost too late. The driver of the truck tore open the door and screamed angrily: “You again! Have you gone crazy, man? Get away from there! This is three tonnes of scrap metal! If they land on you, you’ll be a pile of mush!”

“I won’t move from this spot!” cried Uncle Titus. He was so excited that the tips of his black moustache trembled. “Now get off my property!”

“I’ve had enough! This is the second time Mr Barker has sent me here and his orders are clear! I’m here to deliver this junk!”

“I’ve had just as much as you, my good man!” Uncle Titus cried. “This is the second time I’ve told you it’s all a misunderstanding and that you must leave me alone or else...”

“Or else what?” the driver asked lurking.

“Or else...” Titus began.

“Or else we’ll call the police,” said Jupiter, who had observed everything from the verandah and was now rushing to help his uncle. “It’s that simple. Shall I take over, Uncle Titus?”

“No! No, I don’t think that’s necessary, Juve. I... I have everything under control.”

Jupiter frowned. “Really?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. This guy won’t dare dump his garbage here. So nothing’s gonna happen as long as I stand here,” Uncle Titus insisted.

“So what now?” the driver cried over the hum of the engine. “Will you get out of the way or what?”

“Are you deaf? No, I won’t make room! You get out of here!”

“But Mr Barker said...”

“I couldn’t care less what Mr Barker said! Get out of here! And never come back again!”

Jupiter could clearly see the man’s anger. For seconds, it seemed as if he would simply ignore Uncle Titus’s resistance and dump the pile of junk after all. But finally, with a sound like the snorting of a bull’s rage, the dump truck started moving again and slowly rolled off the salvage yard. As it turned into the road, Uncle Titus breathed a sigh of relief. His face was bright red and he trembled slightly—whether in anger or in excitement, Jupiter could not say.

“Are you all right, Uncle Titus?”

“Yeah, sure.” He tried to smile.

Jupiter looked at his uncle. “Something’s going on, isn’t it, Uncle Titus? That story about that Mr Barker and his dump truck turning up all the time—there’s something fishy going on.”

Uncle Titus said nothing. His eyes flickered. He wanted to say something, but remained silent. Then he took a deep breath, opened his mouth and—

“Jupe!” Aunt Mathilda’s agitated voice across the salvage yard. “Jupe, come quick, there’s something about the art thief on TV.”

In an instant, the dump truck incident was forgotten. Jupiter ran across the grounds, jumped on the verandah and stormed into the house. The TV in the kitchen was running at full volume.

Sharon Lockwood, the well-known reporter of the regional channel, stood in front of a high red brick wall with dangerous looking barbed wire on it and spoke into the camera:

“We are here in front of the Santa Barbara prison. And just a few metres away behind this wall, sits the most famous master art thief of the present day—Victor Hugenay. He is wanted for the theft of paintings in nine countries around the world and has escaped his persecutors countless times... until now. At least that is what Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department, who is responsible for Hugenay’s arrest, claims.

“But so far, no camera team has been given permission to film. Not one reporter has been able to take a photo of the prisoner, and in the first and only press conference held three days ago, the only official statement was: ‘The rumours are true. Victor Hugenay was arrested. He is in custody. I’ll let you know more in due course.’ Since then, there has been silence. The public is asking: ‘Is the master thief really in safe custody? Why are the police not telling us more?’”

Sharon Lockwood was faded out and now some passers-by appeared on the screen in turn. They had been approached by the camera team on the streets of Rocky Beach and Santa Barbara and brought to make a statement.

It started with a young man in a black suit with a briefcase under his arm. “Yes, I’ve heard of it. I really think they’ve caught him. Isn’t that great? When is the police going to release more information? It doesn’t make sense.”

Next was an older fat man in a lumberjack shirt with rolled up sleeves. He was wearing a greasy baseball cap. “The police are kidding us. That ‘Huchaney’, or whatever his name is, let’s see him first. Until I see him, I don’t think he’s in prison.”

Then an elderly lady with huge sunglasses said: “I don’t like the fact that such dangerous people are stuck here in our peaceful little town. He should be deported to Alcatraz immediately! You can’t take any chances with people like that!”

“Alcatraz Prison has been closed since 1963,” the reporter remarked.

“Oh, yeah? Well, there you go. This can’t be good.”

The last one was a teenager in wide skate gear. “Well, it’s clear to me. This guy’s a master thief, right? That means he’s broken into museums a thousand times, he’s broken into security systems and stuff, right? So he can break out of prison anytime he wants to.”

There was another fade. Now the camera was no longer with the passers-by on the street, but directly in front of the Rocky Beach Police Department. It was dark, so the footage must have been taken on one of the previous evenings. Sharon Lockwood’s voice could be heard from the background without her face being seen.

“People are insecure. They are afraid. But the police are keeping it a secret and are not giving out any information. Why? And how really safe is the people of Santa Barbara? Inspector Cotta could unravel the mystery, but he remains silent.”

The recorded report ended and it was switched back to the news station’s studio. “Thank you, Sharon,” said the announcer. “And we’re going to stay in Rocky Beach. Preparations are in full swing for the city’s 200th anniversary celebration. Next weekend, the small coastal town will experience the biggest celebration in its history. Across the city, preparations are

already feverishly underway for the big highlight of the festivities—a spectacular light show created by Californian light artist Albert Glass in collaboration with Rocky Beach-based composer Ford Santucci.

“But the spectacle may hit a snag. The organizer complains about the inadequate power supply for the lighting and sound system, which consumes as much energy in half an hour as the city normally does in a whole day. The poor supply is probably due to an electrical substation that has been out of action since the explosion at the old Rocky Beach city administration building ten days ago.

“Charles Knox, owner of the software company Pixel-Knox and main sponsor of the celebrations, however, promised to personally take care of the adversities. But what not even the multi-millionaire Knox is likely to have an influence on is the weather. El Niño, who has been giving us a hard time for weeks now, will bring us cold and lots of rain in the next few days as well. For this weekend, heavy thunder storms are predicted. Let’s hope the 200th anniversary doesn’t fall through.”

Jupiter approached the TV set and switched it off.

“Fortunately, nothing about you,” said Aunt Mathilda with relief. “Oh, I’m so glad! That’s all we needed, for those reporters to come here to the salvage yard! On the other hand... the salvage yard on TV would be a good advertisement for us. When all the people come for the light show next week, I’ll need your help, Jupe. Can’t I count on you?”

“Sure, Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter said absently. “I hope the reporters won’t come, and it stays that way. Inspector Cotta probably didn’t tell anyone we were involved in this, otherwise all the Wilbur Grahams in the world would have come here to squeeze us out.”

“Anyway, I am so glad that this thing is finally over! I was really afraid for you when this felon was on the loose!”

“He’s not a felon,” Jupiter argued. “You don’t believe that nonsense people say on the street! Hugenay is a thief, yes, but he is not dangerous to the public! To present him as a danger to the people is complete nonsense! There’s no mystery about him. The press doesn’t get the spectacular story they want, so people like Sharon Lockwood and Wilbur Graham just make stuff up.”

“Oh, yeah?” Aunt Mathilda didn’t seem very convinced. “Then why doesn’t your Inspector Cotta say anything about the whole story?”

“He didn’t want any media hype, that’s all,” Jupiter said and at the same moment wondered what he was actually saying. First he defended a criminal who had made his life difficult on more than one occasion, and now he took the side of Inspector Cotta, who has held The Three Investigators in contempt since Hugenay’s arrest.

The night the police had caught Hugenay, handcuffed him and taken him away, Jupiter had a huge weight off his mind. He had felt more carefree and liberated than he had in a long time. Only at this point did he realize how tense he had been, not only the week before, but in all the time that had passed since his first meeting with Brittany. The knowledge that Hugenay had set him up and that he could do it again at any time while he was at large, had influenced his life more than he had realized. And all that was finally over—or so he thought.

But already the next day, tension and restlessness had returned. Cotta had not only kept silent to the journalists, but he also did not contact The Three Investigators, even though they had delivered Hugenay to him on a silver platter. And with every day that passed without any news, Jupiter became more and more angry with the inspector.

In addition, Brittany was also missing. They hadn’t seen her since she handed the package to the taxi driver. Jupiter had gone to her cottage in Rustic Canyon, but had not found her there. A look through the window had told him that Brittany hadn’t completely left,

but had packed enough things to disappear for a while. Since then, there had been no contact from her, which only made Jupiter's mood worse.

Aunt Mathilda, however, was better off not to notice this. She would only worry unnecessarily. And a worried Aunt Mathilda was the last thing Jupiter needed now.

"Jupe, I'm worried," Aunt Mathilda interrupted his brooding.

The First Investigator sighed. "Aunt Mathilda, this is really unnecessary, believe me! Victor Hugenay is in prison, and he's not dangerous, and Inspector Cotta will know what he is doing, and—"

"But that's not what I mean. I'm talking about your uncle. The thing with Barker Scrap Metal and that horrible green truck that keeps popping up here is shaking him up badly... and now of all times when we have so much to do because of the city festival! He's hiding something from me, I'm sure. Didn't he tell you anything?"

Jupe shook his head. "No, he didn't. Excuse me, Aunt Mathilda, but I think Bob and Pete are coming. I must go and meet them!"

Jupe left the house almost hastily. Immediately, a guilty conscience gnawed at him. He should have taken his aunt's worries more seriously. He should have listened to her and calmed her down. But at the moment, he felt unable to take care of the worries of others. His own were enough for him.

At Headquarters, he met Pete and Bob.

"Has Cotta come forward yet?" Pete asked as soon as Jupiter came into the trailer.

"What do you think?" growled Jupiter. "Of course not."

"Try calling him again," Bob suggested.

"I've tried that a dozen times!" the First Investigator replied irritably. "Nothing. Either he's not there or he's in denial."

"This is really not fair," Pete mumbled in disappointment. "What is he thinking? After all, we did all the work and now we won't even know what's happening to Hugenay."

At that second, the phone rang. Bob jumped forward, but Jupiter was faster. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Jupiter?" said a well-known grumpy voice. "Cotta here. We must talk... Now!"

2. The Silence of the Master Thief

Inspector Cotta's office was a battlefield. The desk, which had never been particularly tidy before, was now overflowing with paper. Only a tiny work surface remained free, protected by the piles of files all around it like a fortress wall. When The Three Investigators entered, Cotta's phone rang. Impatiently, the inspector waved at the three to sit down as he picked up the phone.

"Cotta... What? ... No." He hung up. At that moment, the phone rang again. He answered again.

"Cotta... How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone!" He hung up, looked at the three friends, started to say something—and was stopped by the phone a third time.

"Cotta!" he shouted angrily into the mouthpiece. "Tell me, do you hear badly? ... No, damn it!" He slammed the receiver down and pressed a few buttons to silence the phone.

Inspector Cotta sighed heavily, rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and then finally turned to The Three Investigators. "I had called you here, Jupiter, not you three."

"I wish you a good day, Inspector Cotta. And whatever you have to discuss with me, Bob and Pete will know about it anyway, so they might as well be here."

"Exactly," Pete affirmed. "We also want to know why you didn't keep us informed for three days! I mean, we found Hugenay, right? But since he was arrested, we haven't heard a thing."

"I'm very sorry about this, Pete, but believe it or not, I have bigger problems right now than taking care of the wounded ego of three teenagers!"

At that moment, there was a timid knock at the door and a young policeman stuck his head inside. "Inspector Cotta," he said, barely audible, "I know you don't want to be disturbed, but there's a journalist who says—"

"I don't care what he says!" Cotta yelled. "And if I don't want to be disturbed, that usually means I don't want to be disturbed, understand?"

"Sorry!" The police officer flinched back and the door was closed silently.

"So, you three... I know that I should have contacted you, and I'm really sorry, but I just haven't got around to it yet. Things didn't turn out the way I anticipated."

"So what exactly happened?" Jupiter asked objectively.

Again the inspector sighed, then moved forward, leaned his head on his folded hands and reported on the events of the last few days: "My people surprised Victor Hugenay on the beach just as he was about to leave with his buggy. We handcuffed him, read him his rights and took him in. Hugenay let everything happen to him without resistance."

Jupiter nodded. "I'm not surprised. To my knowledge, Hugenay has never committed an act of physical violence. He has other methods of confronting his opponents. Unfortunately, the press doesn't seem to know this. They portray him as a dangerous monster who could break out at any moment and run amok."

"—Which is utter nonsense!" Cotta said angrily. "I am of course aware that Hugenay is not in a maximum security prison, but only in custody in a cell here at the police department."

"Here?" cried Jupiter. "Hugenay is here? But the TV said he was in Santa Barbara."

“Yes. At least this deception succeeded. The Santa Barbara prison can withstand the onslaught of camera crews very well. Our little office here couldn’t do it. A colleague in Santa Barbara owed me a favour. In any case, Hugenay is here in the safest possible custody. Master thief or not, he can’t break out. There is a mechanical lock and an electronic lock, and he’s guarded 24 hours a day by at least two of my men.”

“I believe you, Inspector,” Jupiter tried to calm him down. “But why is he here and not in a more secured prison?”

“That’s exactly the problem, Jupiter. Since this guy was caught, half the world wants to be involved in the case—my superiors, my subordinates, the Los Angeles police, the Malibu police, who think that the beach house is almost on their territory, and they want to take over the case—all of them! They are circling around this office like vultures. On top of that, the damned press guys all want a piece of the big publicity pie. I tell you, this has nothing to do with police work any more. It is pure politics.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “But that still doesn’t explain why he isn’t in a more secured prison...”

“What? Oh, yeah. The prison. That’s because Hugenay is wanted in nine different countries in the world, did you know that? Mostly Europe, of course. At the moment, a few dozen judicial authorities are busy trying to find out whether he has to be extradited and if so, to whom. Interpol and Europol are on my back every day, trying to take the case away from me, but fortunately they are tearing each other apart. It seems that quite a few authorities want to bring the notorious master thief to justice.

“I am beginning to think that they are already setting up presidential suites for him because he is so famous. But as long as the question is not clarified who, so to speak, may legally convict and imprison Hugenay, he will stay here. Because as soon as he’s not here, I’m immediately off the case. This simply means that as soon as anyone else gets hold of Hugenay, Inspector Cotta is written off! You understand? But this is my case, damn it! And no-one is going to take it away from me!”

“Well,” Pete said reluctantly. “Well, actually, it was our case.”

“Yes,” Cotta growled indignantly. “I know that. But for you, it is not about a promotion.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is all about!” Jupiter looked at him annoyingly. “No wonder you didn’t even have five minutes to update us. After all, a promotion like this needs to be well-prepared.”

Jupiter was furious and briefly thought of reminding Cotta that without The Three Investigators, he would not have caught Hugenay, but he chose to keep quiet in order to learn more about what was going on behind the scenes.

“Do you think I want to be an inspector forever, Jupiter?” Cotta continued. “Do you think I chose this job to stop somewhere in the middle of the career ladder? What am I talking about? It doesn’t matter. Let’s make a long story short. I have my hands full maintaining the current state of affairs and making sure Victor Hugenay remains my case.”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Jupiter said. “It’s fine with me. But you certainly didn’t call us here to discuss your promotion, did you?”

Inspector Cotta tightened and cleared his throat. “No. I called you here because Victor Hugenay refuses to speak to me or anyone else in the building. He was hinting at something—that he has information—important information about a crime to be committed in the near future, namely the theft of an extremely valuable painting. But that’s all he’s saying. I don’t know when and where this painting is going to be stolen, I don’t even know which painting it is, or if Hugenay is sending us on a wild-goose chase. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about this, would you?” The inspector looked at them keenly.

“No,” Jupiter said succinctly before his two friends could say anything, but Pete and Bob didn’t move a muscle. They had agreed in advance and decided not to tell Inspector Cotta about *Fire Moon*. Having already handed over Hugenay to him and not even heard a ‘thank you’ for that, they wanted to pursue the case alone.

Cotta frowned briefly, but then continued: “Assuming that Hugenay is telling the truth, it is not at all clear why he is making these insinuations. What he is trying to achieve? Meanwhile, forensics have turned the house on the beach completely upside down, but have not found the slightest clue. It seems that Hugenay came in as a tourist. There is nothing to suggest that he was planning a theft.”

“Nothing at all?” Jupiter wanted to confirm.

“No.”

“All right, but there’s one thing I haven’t quite understood, Inspector Cotta,” Jupiter said. “What’s our involvement in this?”

Cotta grimaced. “It is more than I like,” he growled. “Because everything that I’ve told you so far was just the background story... There’s more... Hugenay remains silent. Apart from what I have just told you, he has revealed nothing else. He resists every interrogation tactic as if it were a tea party. He just sits there and smiles. And then he says that if I want to learn more about the planned theft, I have to respond to his demands. Of course I don’t go in for blackmail... usually. But in this case...” Cotta broke off.

“What demands did he make?” Jupiter asked, when the inspector didn’t make any move to continue talking.

“Actually, it’s just one.”

“Which is?”

Cotta moaned, rubbed his face and let his gaze wander through the room. He did not look at the First Investigator when he said: “Victor Hugenay wants to talk to you, Jupiter... Only to you.”

3. Hugenay's Story

For a moment, Jupiter was speechless. Then he repeated in disbelief: "Talk to me?"

Cotta nodded silently.

"But... but why? I mean..."

"I have no idea, Jupiter," Cotta said. "And believe me, I'd keep you out of this if I had a choice. But I have to consider the possibility that he's telling the truth and that this painting heist is really happening. If it comes out that I knew about it and did nothing about it, not only can I forget about the promotion, but I have to expect to be demoted or even suspended. So... Hugenay only wants to talk to you. Of course we will record the conversation and monitor the room with cameras. There is absolutely no danger."

"I know," Jupiter said. "I know that there is no danger, at least not a physical one."

"So will you talk to him?"

Jupiter turned to Pete and Bob and gave them a questioning look.

"Hugenay wants to talk to you, Juve," Bob said. "Not with us. You must decide for yourself if you want to get involved."

The First Investigator nodded. "Of course I do. There's no doubt about it." He turned to Inspector Cotta. "On one condition... Pete and Bob will watch the meeting through the cameras."

Cotta nodded. "Agreed."

Jupiter's shoe soles squeaked on the matte linoleum floor as Inspector Cotta led the First Investigator down a long corridor to the interrogation room. The plaster on the formerly white walls was crumbling in places. The bright fluorescent lighting made the inspector look pale and sickly—and probably Jupiter himself too.

Cotta whispered something to him: "Nothing can happen at all, Jupiter. I will be right next door. I can see you on the monitor, and through the microphones, I will hear everything. Hugenay knows nothing about this. He has requested that we not monitor the conversation, but I won't risk it, of course. It's perfectly safe. If Hugenay flinches, my men and I will be there immediately. No problem. Calm down, okay?" It almost sounded incantatory.

"Inspector Cotta," Jupiter said calmly. "I know it's not dangerous. You sound as if you now believe the unsubstantiated claims of the press yourself."

"What? Yeah. I mean, no! No, of course not. You're right, Jupiter. Still, you can never be too careful."

The closer Jupiter came to the white painted steel door at the end of the corridor, the faster his heart beat. He was more excited than he had been in a long time, and the inspector's precautions had absolutely no influence on that.

They reached the interrogation room. Cotta nodded encouragingly at the First Investigator, then he unlocked the door and entered. Jupiter followed him.

The room was completely bare and unadorned. There was a barred window and another door. In the middle of the room there was a plain white table. At one side of the table sat Victor Hugenay.

He was wearing blue-grey overalls that belonged to the Rocky Beach Police Department. Jupiter noticed that he had only ever seen Hugenay dressed very elegantly before. But strangely enough, the overalls didn't take anything away from his dignified appearance. He sat upright on his plastic chair and smiled at Cotta. Then he nodded at Jupiter and winked. Only now did Jupiter notice that his hands were handcuffed behind his back.

"Your visitor," Cotta said succinctly. "You have ten minutes, as agreed... and don't get any ideas!"

Cotta patted Jupiter on the shoulder and then he left the room. With a click, the door was locked. Silence flooded the room, chopped into pieces by the ticking of a large white clock on the wall.

"Please sit down, Jupiter!" asked Hugenay.

The First Investigator hesitated, but then stepped up to the table, pulled the chair back and sat down. On the way here, he had decided to let Hugenay speak. Naturally, he was curious about many things, but if Hugenay wanted to talk to him, he had to start. Jupiter would keep silent and listen. At least, that was his plan.

"I am happy to see you, Jupiter," Hugenay said with his sonorous voice in which a slight French accent resonated. The accent had become weaker since the last time. Hugenay seemed to have been in America for quite a while. "How are you?"

"Good," Jupiter said.

"I think it's time to congratulate you. You did it. I'm under lock and key, as they say. I never thought I'd see this coming."

"Of course not," Jupiter replied. "Otherwise it wouldn't have worked out."

"Are you feeling better now?" Hugenay asked.

"I've never felt bad."

"Really? I was under the impression that the story about Brittany back then had thrown you—how do you say—off track."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "I don't understand how you could have got this impression. And frankly, I get the impression that the story with Brittany this time has put you—how do you say—in prison."

Hugenay nodded. "So it was she who put you on my trail? I thought so as much. Well, I should not have trusted her. It was a big mistake."

"I know the feeling. I think it's poetic justice."

Hugenay was silent for a moment. Then a smile played around his lips. "But you still resented me for that Brittany move that day, didn't you?"

"Move? Mr Hugenay, I should clarify something at this point," Juve said. "For you, the encounters with me may have had a playful character... but not for me. You are a criminal and I have brought you to justice. That is all."

"A criminal?" Hugenay remarked. "That sounds so harsh coming from you."

"That's the way it was meant to be," Jupiter said.

"Crimes are bad things where people get hurt, Jupiter, where they are cheated, robbed, hurt or even killed. I have never done anything like that."

"You've stolen paintings worth millions of dollars."

"Are you saying that a bit of oil paint on a piece of canvas can really be worth millions of dollars? Don't you find that completely absurd? I'll tell you, Jupiter—it's all just part of the game. Paintings are play money, nothing more. They're not worth millions... Not really. Do you still want to make me out as a felon?"

"Mr Hugenay, is that why you wanted to talk to me? To persuade me that you only stole some play money and convince me that you were innocent? Then I'm afraid you're wasting

your time.”

“No.”

“Then how about you get down to business? Inspector Cotta told me you knew something about a planned theft and wanted to talk to me about it.”

“That’s right, Jupiter, with you... But unfortunately, the dear Inspector did not keep his word. We are being bugged, so I’m afraid I can’t go into as much detail as I would have liked... Perhaps that won’t be necessary after all.”

Jupiter swallowed. It was no use playing the ignorant. Hugenay would have noticed the lie immediately. “Regrettable...”

“Yeah. I guess that’s kind of the end of it. The end for this great work of art that radiates the heat of fire and the coolness of the moon at the same time. When the shadows of the night fall, the painting is lost forever.”

Jupiter flinched. Hugenay noticed this and winked at him.

“I... don’t understand completely,” Jupiter claimed.

“You understand very well, Jupiter Jones... otherwise we wouldn’t be sitting here now. But unfortunately I can’t tell you more because Inspector Cotta records every word we say. What do you think? Will they will demote him to a patrol man when they learn that he is responsible for the loss of the most valuable painting in the world? Or will they throw him off the force altogether?”

“Well, anyway... Since this topic of conversation has unfortunately been settled due to the microphones in this room, I would like to use the remaining—” Hugenay took a look at the wall clock, “four minutes to tell you a little about me. I have noticed that I know a lot about you, but you hardly know anything about me. Maybe we should start to change that. It could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship!” His smile widened.

Jupiter nodded absently. Hugenay’s words about the ‘heat of fire’, the ‘coolness of the moon’ and the ‘shadows of the night’ was still haunting his mind. “Go ahead.”

Victor Hugenay took a deep breath and looked at Jupiter firmly in the eye. “I come from France, as you know—from a small town not far from Paris. As a child I read a lot, in fact, everything I could get my hands on. And I was interested in puzzles and tricky tasks. When I was about your age now, I met a girl. She was American. I called her Julie. She was as well-read as me, interested in the same things and had a soft spot for art. We hit it off right away and spent every free moment together.

“Her favourite painter was Raúl Hernández. She thought he was an underrated painter who deserved to finally step out of the shadow of his friend, Jean-Marie Jaccard. I didn’t agree with her, but I loved listening to her talk about her passion.” Victor Hugenay gazed pensively into the distance. But Jupiter wondered if his indulgence in the past was real.

“So?” Jupiter asked impatiently.

“I was very fond of Julie, and I wanted to impress her. I wanted to do something very special for her... Finally, I had an idea. Since she loved Hernández’s paintings, what could be more natural than to give her a real Hernández?”

“There was a small exhibition in Paris as part of a show of works by Jean-Marie Jaccard. Anyway, I stole one of the Hernández paintings. Of course, I had planned the whole thing very carefully, but I was still surprised how easy it was. That was how it all began, Jupiter.” Hugenay smiled to himself. “I think you’re the first person I’m telling this story to.”

“Fine,” Jupiter said. “So? What’s so relevant about this story?”

“Well, can’t you figure it out?”

“No,” Jupiter replied without hesitation.

“Does the story of my youth not remind you of someone?”

“No, no one,” Jupe said. “Though I see where you’re going with this. But I’m afraid I don’t see the slightest parallel between your life and mine.”

“Oh, no?”

“No. I never stole a painting,” Jupe affirmed.

“But not so long ago, you were willing to turn stolen paintings into cash to help a girl you were fond of.”

Jupiter took a deep breath, then looked at the clock on the wall. “You have two minutes left, Mr Hugenay.”

“Too bad, I would have liked to talk to you further. Well, maybe some other time. At least let me tell you the end of the story about Julie.”

“Oh, is there a punch line? I hope it can pull your little anecdote out of the mire of insignificance, Mr Hugenay.”

“I think so, Jupiter,” Hugenay continued. “Julie accepted my gift. She was delighted... and fascinated—unfortunately less by me than by what I had done. She was fascinated to the point where she tried it herself.”

“What? Steal a painting?”

Hugenay nodded. “So we did not become a couple, but at least we became colleagues—at least in the beginning. Later, the tables turned. The more valuable the paintings, the more difficult the break-ins became, and the more we went our separate ways. Over the years, two teenagers once together became rivals... And we have remained rivals to this day.” Hugenay was silent and looked at Jupiter with an unblinking stare.

Jupiter looked at the clock. “Time’s up, Mr Hugenay.”

The master thief nodded. “I know. I hope I haven’t bored you too much with my story.”

“Not at all, Mr Hugenay. I have listened to you very carefully.”

“I assumed as much.” Again he winked at Jupiter almost imperceptibly. “Then you know what you have to do!”

4. In a Fine Pickle

“Here he comes,” Pete said as Jupiter left the interrogation room. Immediately Bob and Pete, who together with Inspector Cotta had watched and eavesdropped on the entire conversation via the cameras, stepped into the corridor.

“So? How was it?” Bob asked the First Investigator.

“You saw it.”

“Yes. We did. But—”

“And for that, I let that guy bully me for three days?” Cotta intervened. His face was bright red. “He didn’t say anything, not a word!”

“He didn’t say anything because he realized that you were eavesdropping on him,” Jupiter corrected the inspector.

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” Cotta was furious. “Let me tell you something, wise guy Jones. I am obliged to monitor Hugenay! Do you know what that means? It means to bend to rules and regulations... but you probably never heard of that.”

“Inspector Cotta, far be it from me to offend or insult you with my remark. I merely made one observation. Hugenay was silent because he wanted to tell me, not you. It’s neither my fault nor yours. Moreover, I would be very grateful if you would stop venting your frustrations on me and find other ways of reducing stress in the future. Goodbye!”

“Aw, man!” Pete said as The Three Investigators left the police department. “You really gave it back to Cotta!”

“He did not get what he hoped for,” Jupe said. “But to put us in this predicament is more than unfair. Come on, fellas! Let’s go home. We should analyze the situation in detail!”

When The Three Investigators reached the salvage yard on their bicycles, they saw a tall, slim man with a camera bag over his shoulder pacing up and down in front of the wrought-iron gate. He had sparse blond hair, wore a worn corduroy jacket and seemed to be waiting for someone. Apparently, he had been waiting for some time, because he was rubbing his hands freezing.

Pete slowed down. “Look there! Am I dreaming? Isn’t that—”

“Oh, no!” Bob interrupted him.

“You said it,” Jupe growled gloomily.

“Shall we sneak in through Red Gate Rover?” Pete suggested. “Then he can wait out there until he freezes to death.”

Jupiter thought about the proposal for a moment. “The idea isn’t a bad one, but Aunt Mathilda wouldn’t like a frozen man at the gate. Seriously, this guy will wait for days to get what he wants! That already makes me nervous. No, I want to know what he is doing here... although I can already guess.”

The First Investigator rode his bike straight for the man who had his back to them and only slowed down two metres away from him. The tyres squealed and the man jumped forward in shock.

“Jupiter!” he gasped in horror.

“Wilbur Graham... What a pleasure. Who’d have thought we’d see you again. I must say, Mr Graham, I didn’t think you had the courage to come back here.”

Wilbur Graham quickly regained control of himself. “What does that have to do with courage?”

“Well, well, well, listen,” Pete spoke up. “After what you wrote about us in the *Los Angeles Tribune*...”

“Have you ever heard of freedom of the press, young man?” Graham said.

“Have you ever thought of not showing your face here again, Mr Graham?” Pete snapped back.

“Let it go, Pete,” Jupiter mumbled and asked Mr Graham: “What do you want?”

“I have a business proposition for you.”

“Why should we do business with you?” Bob asked.

“To restore your reputation. The article that I wrote then may not have been—shall I say—entirely fair.”

“Not entirely fair?” Pete repeated. “That is a gross understatement.”

“Call it what you want, Pete. What’s clear is that the article wasn’t exactly great for your career. But I can make things right. I’m working on a book right now—a book about Victor Hugenay.”

“Sheesh!” Bob remarked.

“Are you still obsessed with that person?” Jupiter asked.

“I know my way around better now. What could be more obvious than to earn money with my knowledge? Anyway, I have been in France for the last two weeks doing research. And I read from the newspapers there that Victor Hugenay was caught... near Rocky Beach. I flew back as fast as I could, of course, but guess what? They won’t let me talk to him.”

“You don’t say!” Bob said with a straight face.

“That’s a surprise,” Pete added.

“I still don’t understand why you’ve come to us,” Jupiter said.

“Because I suspect you’re somehow involved in this.”

Pete swallowed. Bob tried to look as uninvolved as possible. Only Jupiter switched fast enough. He laughed amused. “Do you think we were in cahoots with Hugenay? I must say, Mr Graham, your imagination knows no bounds. You can work that lovely idea into your book. No one will read it anyway.”

Wilbur Graham shook his head reluctantly. “I don’t mean that you were working with him. But you must admit that it’s a very big coincidence that Hugenay was tracked down in this neighbourhood, of all places. Besides, in the past you were usually better informed about him than anyone else. So I would like to interview you for my book. And maybe you can put in a good word for me with the Rocky Beach police since you have contacts there. In return, I will only speak positively about you in my book... Very positive.”

“That’s the last straw!” Pete cried furiously.

“And above all, it’s blackmail,” Bob added.

“Have a nice day,” Jupiter said soberly, turned around.

The Three Investigators entered the salvage yard area. Mr Graham started to follow them, but the second he stepped over the threshold, Jupiter turned to him and said: “If you don’t leave the Jones premises immediately, I will call our contacts at the Rocky Beach Police Department!”

Graham took a step back and The Three Investigators proceeded on to Headquarters.

“Wait a minute!” Graham shouted after them from the gate. “This interview is really important for my book project! I need your help.”

The Three Investigators ignored him. Now Graham became angry. “You know what happens if you refuse to help me? The article for the *Tribune* was just the beginning! With this book, I can ruin you if I want to! Do you hear me? I can ruin you.”

“Go ahead, Mr Graham!” Jupiter cried back over his shoulder. “You won’t find a publisher anyway!”

They entered Headquarters and Pete closed the door. He moaned. “Man! What a pain in the butt! Unbelievable!”

Bob threw a cautious look through the window and giggled. “He’s foaming with rage. But now he’s finally leaving. Thank goodness.”

“An extremely unpleasant person,” Jupiter agreed. “So unpleasant that we should quickly put this incident behind us and get on with more important things. You heard my conversation with Hugenay. What do you think?”

“When Hugenay suddenly started babbling about fire, moon and the shadow of the night, I almost blurted out to Cotta,” Pete confessed. “That was no accident, was it, Juve?”

“Certainly not. Hugenay spoke as clearly as he could, about *Fire Moon* and Night Shadow, who is apparently after the painting. However, he packaged this information in such a way that only we could understand him but not Inspector Cotta.”

“But I thought Night Shadow was Hugenay’s accomplice,” Bob interjected.

“Apparently not anymore. Remember what Brittany said? Hugenay was afraid to meet Night Shadow in person. That’s why he needed her for the errands. Hugenay did not trust Night Shadow. So it seems reasonable to assume now that since Hugenay is out of the picture, Night Shadow wants the painting himself. He must have gathered enough information in his dealings with Hugenay.”

“But why did he tell you all this, Juve?” Pete asked. “Does Hugenay really want to save the painting from being stolen?”

“I think so,” Bob said. “Not to preserve a precious work of art, but to prevent someone else from getting it.”

“But he’s in prison,” Pete interjected. “What can he do from there?”

“Maybe it’s simply a matter of honour for him,” Bob said. “After all, he is the master thief. He won’t let anyone else get the better of him.”

“Neither Night Shadow nor the mysterious Julie,” Jupiter added.

“The mysterious Julie?” Pete asked. “What’s she got to do with it?”

“Haven’t you noticed? When Hugenay told his touching story of his youth, I thought at first that he just wanted to allude once more to our alleged similarity, as he had done earlier. But then I realized that it was just the packaging for Inspector Cotta. Hugenay was trying to tell me something quite different—that there is someone else after *Fire Moon*—his rival Julie.”

“You could be right,” Pete said as he thought about Hugenay’s words. “But who is Julie?”

“We’d better find out right away if we’re going to save *Fire Moon*,” Jupiter said.

Bob paced slowly up and down the trailer and shook his head thoughtfully. “One thing I don’t understand... If Hugenay’s main concern is that neither Night Shadow nor Julie get the painting... why doesn’t he tell Inspector Cotta everything he knows?”

“Well,” Jupiter said. “Good question. He probably doesn’t want to miss the pleasure of playing a game with us again. He may be behind bars, but as it has shown today, even from there, he still has an amazing amount of influence over the course of events.”

Thoughtfully, The Three Investigators remained silent for a while.

Finally, Pete cleared his throat and asked timidly: “And what are we going to do now? I mean, if we follow up on Hugenay’s clues, we’ll be doing exactly what he wants us to do, right? We’ll get involved in one of his games, but in the first place, that’s what we’re trying to avoid.”

“On the other hand, there’s still the unsolved secret of *Fire Moon*,” Bob said. “If we do nothing, Night Shadow or Julie will steal it. That, in turn, we must prevent.”

“We’re in a fine pickle,” Pete thought, “once again.”

“We’re moving on,” the First Investigator decided. “At least until we find out where the painting is hidden... then we can leave Julie and Night Shadow to the police, for all I care.”

“Why don’t we do it now?” Pete suggested. “Leave it to the police, I mean.”

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a reproachful look. “You still want to do that after the performance Inspector Cotta gave us today? All he thinks about now is his promotion. And you expect us to help him with that? No, thank you. Besides, he wouldn’t be able to do much of the work for us anyway. We do not know who Julie and Night Shadow are, and *Fire Moon* is still a mystery. And when it comes to solving mysteries, The Three Investigators are clearly superior to the police.”

“But what lead are we going to follow?” Bob asked. “Do you have any ideas?”

“First, there’s Julie. It might not be easy, but maybe we can find out something about her. Second, the painting itself. We have the letters of the two painters, we have the mysterious inscriptions—and something can be done with them.” Jupiter smiled. “And finally, there’s a third thing, which we would have missed if Cotta hadn’t given us the decisive clue.”

“Cotta gave us a clue?” Pete asked. “He’s particularly annoyed at that moment? What clue did he give us?”

“The package,” Jupiter said with a smile.

“What package?” Pete asked.

“The package that Brittany hid the tracking transmitter in. Remember that? Inspector Cotta said his men found nothing in Hugenay’s beach house to indicate a planned theft. But I’d be very surprised if the contents of the package had nothing to do with the theft. That means that the police must have overlooked it.”

Bob frowned. “But the police turned the beach house upside down and found nothing! Why should we find anything?”

“Because we have a distinct advantage.”

“Which is?” Bob wondered.

The First Investigator’s smile grew wider. “The receiver for the tracking transmitter.”

5. No Traces in the Sand

“Do you really think that the transmitter is still intact?” Bob asked as they climbed into his Beetle. Pete’s MG was still in the garage for repairs.

“We’ll know in a moment,” Jupe replied, looking at the receiver. “Remember, last week we picked up the signal a few hundred metres from the salvage yard. But I have no idea whether the battery is still working. After all, that thing has been transmitting continuously for four days.”

Bob drove on the coastal road towards Malibu. Nothing happened on the receiver.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” mumbled Jupiter. “The battery is certainly weakened. But that doesn’t mean that it has no juice at all. Even if it only transmits a range of twenty metres, that will be enough. We’ll know where to look.”

But the closer The Three Investigators got to Hugenay’s beach house, the more their hopes dwindled. Finally, Bob parked at the exact spot where everything had started that night. They got out of the car. The wind was still just as strong and ruffled their hair as they approached the slope and looked down.

The house lay deserted, with no police or reporters around. But from afar, they could see that the entire building was cordoned off with yellow police tapes, which gave the sandy grey surroundings an irritatingly garish tone. As The Three Investigators reached the bottom of the staircase, they saw that all the windows and the door had been sealed as well.

“Well, what now?” Bob asked and looked through a window. “We can’t get in there without the police knowing.”

“I don’t think we have to either,” replied Jupiter. “Because I have been thinking... The police searched the house and found nothing. Why is it so?”

“I don’t know,” Pete said. “Why?”

“Because Hugenay had the package with him when he tried to escape! And when he realized he couldn’t escape the police, he—”

“—Hid the package,” Pete said. “Of course, Jupe. On the beach! The package is somewhere on the beach!”

First they did a quick check around the outside of the house. Then they looked down to the sea. Because of the bad weather, hardly anyone was there. They only saw two or three lonely joggers and a few walkers, but the wide, flat plain of the beach itself was empty. The tyre tracks of the buggy and the police cars had been washed away by the rain that very night. Apart from the yellow tapes, there was nothing left to indicate what had happened here only four days ago.

“The beach is pretty big,” Bob remarked. “Do you think Hugenay just dropped the package somewhere? Or did he have time to bury it?”

Jupiter tried to recall the night chase. Had Hugenay stopped somewhere before the police caught him? “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“If he just threw it away, it’s definitely not there anymore,” Pete said. “Perhaps someone found it and took it away. And if it was buried... we can’t dig the whole beach!”

“Let’s first see if the transmitter is still working,” Jupiter decided and descended the path.

The Three Investigators wandered across the beach in a wide arc. Jupiter's gaze was fixed on the receiver, but nothing happened on the display.

"There's no point," Pete said after five minutes. "We'll never find anything this way."

"You're probably right," Jupiter replied thoughtfully. "But I have an idea. We have to go back to the salvage yard! Because there is still a way to track the transmitter. If it's really here on the beach, we'll find it!"

Late afternoon, it started to rain. And it didn't stop. But The Three Investigators didn't care. After testing their equipment, they went back to Malibu.

The sun had long since disappeared behind the horizon, and the dense cloud cover did its part to darken the sky. By the time they got down to the beach, it was almost pitch dark. But they didn't need to see anything. They just need to listen...

"Let's see then," Jupiter muttered and began to assemble one of the three devices they had brought from the workshop. It reminded them remotely of a vacuum cleaner. He extended the handle by putting a couple of metal rods together. At the lower end of this rod was a plate-shaped structure to which wires were attached that led to a headphone. Jupiter put it on, pressed a small switch and began to swing the plate over the sand, from left to right and back again—like a blind man using his cane to scan the surroundings in front of him.

"With the metal detector we can detect metal objects in the sand. The detector works by ___"

"Jupe," Pete interrupted him impatiently. "It's not the first time we've used these things. And as to how they work, you can explain to us on a sunny day on the verandah over a piece of cherry pie, but certainly not in here in the pouring rain! Can we start now?"

Jupiter muttered something incomprehensible, but then helped Bob and Pete to assemble their equipment.

Then they set to work and walked step by step in a row along the beach. The area they wanted to investigate was not exactly small. But luck seemed to be on their side, because after only a few metres something was humming in Bob's headphones.

"Here's something!" Bob cried and put the metal detector aside and started digging. He found a dime. Disappointed, he put it in his pocket, shrugged his shoulders and picked up the metal detector again.

Three minutes later, Pete found something. He dug up a key chain.

After two hours, The Three Investigators had almost given up their hopes. In the meantime, the small bag in which they had collected their finds contained coins worth one dollar and thirty-two cents, two broken sunglasses, a handful of hair clips, rusty cans, several large and small keys, a bottle opener, mountains of bottle caps, a chain and a dog tag. But then the tide turned.

"I have it," Bob shouted, pointing his flashlight at a little metal button in his hand to make sure. "That's it! The tracking transmitter!"

Pete and Jupiter rushed over immediately. The transmitter was stuck to a piece of paper that must have been part of the package. The rest had disappeared. The Three Investigators dug in the sand for a while, but there was nothing there.

"The package is gone," Pete said gloomily. "I don't believe it. What does it mean?"

"This means that someone has taken the package, discovered the tracking transmitter and thrown it away," Jupiter said in disappointment as the rain dripped from his hair.

"And who could that be?" Pete asked.

"That is the all-important question." Jupe sighed.

When The Three Investigators met at Headquarters the next day after school, Pete and Bob was depressed.

Bob sighed heavily. "If I may summarize... after the package disappeared, we only have two leads left to follow—one, the mysterious Julie; and two, the mysterious epitaphs of Hernández and Jaccard."

Pete nodded. "And somehow we're stuck."

Jupiter smiled. "I had plenty of time to think today during maths lesson, as I finished the tasks much earlier than the others. And I had an idea how we might find out Julie's full name and where she lives."

"So?" Pete asked doubtfully. "How would you do that?"

"There is someone who knows a great deal about Victor Hugenay... perhaps more than we do, anyway."

Pete frowned. "You mean Brittany? But we don't know where she is."

"No, not Brittany. She knows nothing." Jupiter put on a grim smile. "I'm talking about someone with whom we have unfinished business... and who will certainly listen to us."

6. Getting Even

It wasn't difficult to find Wilbur Graham's phone number. In fact, it was just a single call to the *Los Angeles Tribune*. Just a minute later, Jupiter heard a beep on the line.

"Graham," the reporter said on the other end.

"Hello, Mr Graham, this is Jupiter Jones."

For seconds, there was silence at the other end.

"Mr Graham, are you there?"

"Yes," the man replied nervously. "Yes, I am. I'm just... very surprised."

"I can understand that," Jupe said. "Mr Graham, due to further reflection after our conversation yesterday, we changed our minds. We are ready to help you with your book project."

"Really? This is very sudden. May I ask what brought about this change of heart? After all, twenty-four hours ago, you were going to have me removed by the police."

"That reaction was perhaps a little rash," replied Jupiter. "And the change of heart is not as pronounced as you might think. We will not give you an interview, but we can help you in other ways and make some contacts that might help you."

"I'm listening."

"There's an old childhood friend of Hugenay's—an American who lived in France for a while. Have you made contact with her yet?" Jupiter asked.

Graham was so confused by Jupiter's kindness that he forgot to be careful. "You mean Julianne Wallace? Yes, I tried to talk to her months ago. But not a chance. She admitted to knowing Hugenay from back then, but she wouldn't say another word about him."

"How unfortunate. Does she live in California?"

"From what I understand, yes," Mr Graham said. "In Solromar. But tell me, Jupiter... what do you expect in return for your sudden helpfulness?"

"Nothing, Mr Graham. In fact, nothing at all, because you've already helped us a great deal. Thank you and have a nice day. Goodbye, Mr Graham." Jupiter hung up abruptly and turned to his friends with a gloating grin.

"That was quick and effective," he said happily. "So the lady's name is Julianne Wallace and she lives in Solromar. I guess that makes The Three Investigators and Mr Graham even. But tell me... Julianne Wallace... doesn't that name sound familiar to you?"

Pete and Bob looked at each other questioningly and shook their heads at the same time.

"Strange. It is to me. Off hand, I can't remember where I've heard or seen that name before..."

After Wilbur Graham called for the fourth time and left insults on their answering machine, The Three Investigators left Headquarters. It had been easy to find out Julianne Wallace's address. Solromar was a tiny town, and there was only one Julianne Wallace in the phone book. She lived on Lincoln Street.

Bob was at the wheel and steered his Beetle over the coastal road towards the dark cloud towers on the horizon. The atmosphere was gloomy as it had been for weeks, but Bob felt surprisingly light and buoyant.

Pete and Jupiter had a similar feeling. The defeat of the previous evening was forgotten, and for the first time since Huguenay's arrest, they believed that they were in control of the situation again. The triumph over Wilbur Graham's snootiness had made their spirits soar. They also had a mission... and a hot lead.

In Solromar, Bob let his friends out. He wanted to drive on to Oxnard, about thirty kilometres away, to pay another visit to Hernández House. He hoped to find out more about the Jaccard letters and the tombstones there.

"Lincoln Street... Lincoln Street," Jupiter muttered and looked around indecisively. The sun was about to set and the air was soaked with fine drizzle.

Together they set out on a search, but at first, they wandered around on the wrong side of the main road. Only after a quarter of an hour did they find what they were looking for. Lincoln Street was in the immediate vicinity of the beach. Actually, it wasn't even a proper road. The tar surface was so old that it looked more like a gravel road, but apparently nobody thought it was necessary to repair it since there were only five houses anyway.

No, not houses, as Jupiter discovered as they approached. They were oversized caravans and mobile home trailers, but they looked as if they had been standing there for many years. The properties were separated by fences. There were small, well-kept gardens and separate mailboxes along the road. Behind the road, the area dropped down to the beach.

"This is not a camp site," Pete noted. "People really live here." There are lights in some of the trailers. Jupiter read the names on the mailboxes as they slowly walked past them.

Lincoln Street was a dead end. Behind the last trailer was a small field, and then the road ended in impenetrable undergrowth. On the field was an old, weathered sign with a lovelessly painted inscription.

"'Camping—Contact Mrs Lansky'," Jupiter read. "That's the name I saw on one of the mailboxes earlier. She seems to own the property... at least this field here."

"Look here!" cried Pete, who had stepped up to the mailbox in front of the last trailer. He tapped on the name plate—"Wallace".

Hernández House was almost deserted when Bob entered it twenty minutes before closing time.

"We'll be closing soon," said the lady at the cash register as she cast a regretful glance over her rimless glasses at the large, loudly ticking clock on the wall. "Would you still like to visit the exhibition?"

"Well, to be honest, I was hoping to meet one of your staff members."

"Oh, yeah? Who's that?"

"Honestly, I don't know her name. But she told my friends and I a week ago a lot about Raúl Hernández."

Mrs Albright, as Bob saw from her name tag, smiled indulgently. "That could have been any one of my colleagues, young man, after all we are in Hernández House. But if you can describe her to me..."

"Well, she's pretty big, first of all. Blonde hair of medium length..."

"Pretty big? Then it is Miss Wallace."

"Miss Wallace?" Bob repeated in disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Julianne Wallace," Mrs Albright said. "And you're lucky, because here she comes right now!"

Julianne Wallace's trailer had apparently been standing on Lincoln Street for a long time—the tyres had been removed and the trailer jacked up. Everything behind the windows was dark. A few soaked towels were waving on a clothesline leading from a corner of the trailer to a small fruit tree in the small garden. Next to it was some garden furniture, and on the table lay an open paperback completely soaked by the rain.

"She doesn't seem to be there," remarked Jupiter. "And possibly has been for some time, for who leaves her reading in the middle of the rain? Furthermore, the wet laundry and the wet book indicate a hasty departure." With these words he entered the grassy area and headed for the trailer.

"Jupe!" hissed Pete. "What are you doing?"

"I want to look around a bit."

"But shouldn't we be careful?"

"We are. It's dark, there's nobody here, and the only four existing neighbours are hiding from the rain or are not at home. There is absolutely no danger."

Jupiter peered into the trailer through a window. The sight he saw reminded him of their headquarters. Everything was very small and cramped and crammed with things for daily life. The small desk in the corner was overflowing with books, magazines and notes. It was too dark to make out any details. Only one book title was printed so large that Jupiter could make it out—*Jean-Marie Jaccard—A Life in Colours*. "Well, what do you know?"

Jupe and Pete took another turn around the trailer, but there was nothing else to discover.

"So what do we do now?" Pete asked,

"Well," Jupiter mumbled listlessly. "We could ask the neighbours about Miss Wallace... or we could wait for Bob to come and pick us up. We could also lie in wait for Julianne Wallace to return, which, if you ask me, could take days. Or else..." A twinkle came into Jupiter's eyes. "We could check out her trailer."

Pete guessed the First Investigator's thoughts. "Check the inside?"

"Exactly. Pete, I'm proud of you. And I hope you brought your lock pick set?"

"Do I ever not have it with me?"

"Rarely..."

Pete pulled a small, dark case out of his pocket and presented it with a grin. "Guess what? Today's not one of those rare days."

"Please, Mr Crenshaw, I'm happy to let you take the lead in this matter!"

"You're too kind." Pete approached the door. The lock was simple, he knew that at first glance. It would not take long to pick. With nimble fingers, he picked out a lock pick and tampered with the lock while Jupiter made sure no one saw them.

"Okay, three, two, one—that's it," Pete said with satisfaction and opened the door to Julianne Wallace's trailer.

At that moment, an alarm siren went off in deafening volume and the trailer started flashing brightly like a Christmas tree.

7. Alarm!

Mrs Albright pointed down the hallway leading to the exhibition rooms. Bob followed her gaze. It was there that they had met the woman who had told them so much about Raúl Hernández the week before. As Bob now recalled, Jupiter wanted to put a question mark on the woman—not knowing that she was Julianne Wallace!

Bob was in a fix. He realized that once she recognized him, she would have more than a faint suspicion, and then the secret tailing would be over. So Bob decided that she should not see him. She should not see him at all!

“Julianne!” cried Mrs Albright. “There’s someone here who wants to talk to you.”

Bob panicked. Instinctively, he turned around in a flash and reached for a brochure lying next to the cash register. Hectically, he flicked through it and tried to somehow disappear into thin air. He needed a plan!

Already heavy steps approached. Then suddenly a shrill beeping sounded and the steps stopped. Bob risked a look over his shoulder.

He saw Julianne Wallace taking out a small device that emitted the beeping sound. She stared at it, startled.

“Julianne?” asked Mrs Albright. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” Julianne murmured without taking her eyes off the beeper. Then suddenly she ran off. “I have to go home right away, Mrs Albright, I’m sorry!”

She rushed to a dressing room, ripped a coat off the hook and ran out of the building. Bob was sure that she didn’t even notice him there. In fact, he was relieved but he gave Mrs Albright a puzzled look.

“Oh, this... this is really embarrassing,” said Mrs Albright, apparently as confused as Bob. “She’s never been like this before. Something must have happened! What did she say? She must go home? Goodness, I hope it’s not something serious.”

“Um... yeah, let’s hope so,” mumbled Bob. “Anyway, I have to go now.”

Bob left Hernández House in a hurry. Julianne Wallace wanted to go home! In other words, to where Jupiter and Pete were at that moment! And that was certainly no coincidence.

In the car park, he saw her jump into an old, dented Jeep. Bob got into his Beetle and took off in pursuit.

The howling of the siren was so shrill and loud that Pete and Jupiter were sure to attract the attention of half the Californian coast.

“Turn it off, Juve! Turn it off!” Pete shouted.

“How? You joker?”

“I... I don’t know, I...”

The two detectives stood in front of the trailer as if rooted to the spot and stared stunned at the flashing lights.

“Let’s go!” Jupiter finally decided and pulled Pete out of the trailer. Pete quickly shut the door and both of them ran off towards the road. But then the door of another trailer flew open and an older woman rushed out. She stepped into the road and blocked their way.

“You rascals!” she cried, swinging a stick. “Stay where you are!”

“Now what?” cried Pete.

“Plan B,” Jupiter said and ran directly towards the woman!

Julianne Wallace drove so fast that Bob had trouble not to lose sight of her. More than once, he saw a patrol car and slowed down to avoid being stopped by the police. Miss Wallace didn't seem to care. This led Bob to fear the worst.

They soon reached Solromar. Bob could already see a strange flickering near the beach from the main road. Then he heard a shrill howl. Julianne Wallace flicked on her turn signal and turned right. Then she drove into Lincoln Street and braked sharply. Bob parked the Beetle at the corner a distance away and sneaked closer to the scene on foot.

The flickering light came from the end of Lincoln Street. The siren wailing was mixed with excited voices.

“Miss Wallace! Miss Wallace! Thank goodness, you're finally here! Miss Wallace, turn off that hideous noise. I can't stand it,” a lady yelled.

“Mrs Lansky, what happened? Who are those boys? What—”

“Please, Miss Wallace, turn off the sirens first, I can't stand it any longer!”

Bob was now so close that he could make out Jupiter and Pete in the flickering light. They were standing with Mrs Lansky, an elderly lady with a walking stick, and to Bob's relief they did not look as if they were in trouble. Bob decided to stay under cover all the same.

“No,” Bob heard Julianne Wallace say. “I want to know what happened first. Someone has broken into my trailer! The alarm and my beeper went off.”

“Yes!” Mrs Lansky confirmed. “There was a burglar! But he escaped when the siren started. The two boys here were chasing the man, but he got away. Isn't that terrible? Who would do such a thing?”

“I'd like to know that too,” Julianne Wallace mumbled absently. Then she pulled a small device—a remote control—from her pocket and pressed a button. Immediately the flickering and the siren sound died away.

“Thank goodness!” sighed Mrs Lansky. “I thought it would never end!”

“So, let's start again,” Julianne said. “There was a burglar and you two were chasing him?”

“That's how it was, ma'am,” Jupiter confirmed. At that moment, he looked in Bob's direction and noticed him.

“Who are you? And what were you doing here? Have I seen you somewhere before?”

“We come from Rocky Beach and had heard from a friend that this was an excellent place to camp. Nice and quiet and away from the city. So we wanted to have a look around. Yeah, and then suddenly, there was a man walking towards your trailer. He didn't seem suspicious at first. We thought he lived here. It wasn't until the alarm went off and he took off that we realized he must've been a burglar. We ran after him, but he was faster. He got away in a car. Our friend Bob went after him. Ah, here he comes now. Bob! Bob, here you are!”

Bob, who wasn't quite sure if he had got it all right yet, broke free from his hiding place in the shadows and hurried towards his friends.

“Bob, were you able to track the burglar?”

“Um... yeah. Sort of. I tried to follow him and then...”

“You lost him?” Jupiter helped him out. “I don't believe it.”

“Yes, yes, sorry.”

“What a bummer.”

“Well, this is really annoying,” Mrs Lansky interfered. “That was very brave of you. You know, Miss Wallace, at first I thought the boys were the burglars.”

“Did you see that man?” Miss Wallace asked sceptically.

“Oh, yes, yes, sure, I did,” Jupiter said.

“And what did he look like?” Miss Wallace continued to probe.

“Well, you know... he was so far away and it was already dark. I only saw him for a moment.”

Mrs Lansky then she turned to Pete. “And you?”

“Well,” Pete said. That’s all he could think of.

“He was of medium height... kind of,” Jupiter muttered and pretended to think hard.

“And middle-aged... quite ordinary in other ways.”

“Well, that really helps. I’ll go see if anything’s been stolen.” She walked swiftly towards the trailer.

“I’ll help her,” Jupiter mumbled and followed Julianne.

As he stood at the open door, Julianne Wallace was just bending over a large flowerpot from which a miserable-looking indoor plant was growing. But at that moment, she noticed the First Investigator, turned around and told him off: “I can do very well on my own, thank you!”

“Excuse me, I—”

She slammed the door in his face. Jupe then trotted back to the others.

A minute later, Miss Wallace came back out. She seemed a little calmer. “Nothing seems to be stolen,” she told Mrs Lansky. “At least, not as far as I can tell at first glance.” Then she turned to The Three Investigators again. “Do I know you? Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter said and shrugged his shoulders.

“Tell me, Julianne, aren’t you going to call the police?” Mrs Lansky asked.

“I don’t think that’s necessary. There’s nothing missing.”

“Thanks to your alarm system,” remarked Jupiter. “It is really quite impressive. Did you build it yourself?”

“Yes.”

“No offence, but isn’t this precaution a bit beyond the usual level?”

“You can’t be too careful. And now, if you’ll excuse me. I want to take another look around.” Julianne Wallace returned to her trailer and closed the door.

“She’s a little upset,” Mrs Lansky said apologetically. “Don’t hold it against her. She’s been working so much lately—not just at the museum, but at home, too. Day and night she’s brooding about something.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bob asked as casually as possible. “What about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Something about paintings and art. I don’t know anything about those things... but she seems to care a lot about it.”

“Interesting,” Jupiter remarked.

“And now, finally to business!” Mrs Lansky abruptly changed the subject.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked at her with irritation. “Business?” Pete repeated.

“Yes. I’m Mrs Lansky. I own these properties. Including that field over there. And you said you wanted to camp here? The bins are at the end of the road, and I insist you use them and not throw your dirt on the field. You can get water from the tap on my property. There’s a supermarket on the main road where you can shop. And no loud music after ten o’clock! I’m very sensitive to that. Do you understand everything?”

The Three Investigators nodded silently.

"Fine. When do you want to start?"

"Uh..." Bob started to say something.

"Next weekend," Jupiter replied. "Provided this field isn't already taken."

"Nobody has asked for it yet! Three fine boys like you are always welcome as guests. I hope the weather will be better by then! Then it will be nice and wonderful here. See you Friday, then." Mrs Lansky turned around and returned to her trailer.

"Gee whiz," Pete said when they finally got back into the Beetle and headed back to Rocky Beach. "Well, that was close!"

Bob quickly told his two friends about what happened at the museum. "Indeed," Bob said. "Because if Julianne had seen me at the museum, then the hoax about me chasing the burglar would have been blown up immediately. But as far as the burglar, there really wasn't one, was there, Jupe?"

"Yes, there was," replied the First Investigator. "It was Pete."

"Hey! You put me up to this!" Pete defended himself.

"That's right, though. Fortunately, we were able to convince Mrs Lansky that we weren't the burglars, but that we were merely pursuing the perpetrator."

"But then how could she claim that she saw the burglar herself?" Bob asked.

"Guess what?" Pete said and laughed. "Jupe sort of talked her round and round until she finally believed that someone had really been there."

"It is always amazing how easy it is to influence a person with targeted suggestions," said Jupiter. "Be that as it may, things may have gone wrong today, but we also have successes to report. Firstly, we have found Julianne Wallace. Secondly, we have the opportunity to shadow her day and night next weekend without her suspecting anything."

"Wait a minute," Pete interrupted him. "Does this mean we're really gonna camp in that field? I thought you only agreed to Mrs Lansky so you could get rid of her as quickly as possible."

"Not at all, dear Pete. It was all part of my plan to follow Julianne Wallace. So now, what would be a better way to keep an eye on her?"

"In this weather in a tent? Great!" the Second Investigator moaned. "We're going to freeze our butts off and drown ourselves in it. Great plan, Jupe!"

The First Investigator smiled. "Who said anything about a tent? A tent is indeed not suitable for our purposes. We need to keep an eye on Julianne Wallace for long hours! If we sat in front of a tent all day and stared over at her trailer, she would quickly become suspicious. No, we need more space. A place where we can watch her without her noticing... where we can talk without her hearing us... where we can lie in wait at night while she thinks we're asleep."

Bob raised his eyebrows. "And how can we do that? We need a trailer ourselves."

Jupiter's smile widened. "You've got it!"

8. A Very, Very, Very Stupid Idea

Mathilda Jones seemed very worried as she watched the activities of The Three Investigators. Pete had been lying under the trailer for half an hour and only gave an unnerved groan now and then. Jupiter ran all over the salvage yard in search of... nobody really knows what. And Bob was busy dismantling the 'See-All' periscope which was constructed of stove pipes that jutted out of the roof of the trailer.

Aunt Mathilda scratched her head at a loss. Suddenly Bob lost his footing on the wet, arched roof of the trailer and slipped off. Aunt Mathilda let out a frightened scream and hurried to help him, but by then it was too late. Bob landed roughly on the wet ground.

"Ouch!"

"Bob, for goodness' sake! Are you hurt?" Mathilda gasped.

Bob jumped up and tried to wipe the dirt off his trousers, but he distributed it rather generously. "No, I'm all right, Mrs Jones. Thank you."

"What on earth are you people doing?" Mathilda asked.

"We..." Bob looked for Jupe in the hope that he would answer his aunt's question. But the First Investigator had disappeared again behind a mountain of junk.

"What we're doing?" Pete's muffled voice came from underneath the trailer. "That's a very good question, Mrs Jones. Your precious nephew has had a very, very, very stupid idea! He wants to get this heap of junk moving again!"

"You want to move the trailer?"

"Well, he wants!" Pete replied.

"Where are you going to move it to?" Aunt Mathilda still didn't seem to understand.

But at that moment, Jupiter came near, his hands stained with oil, but with a satisfied smile on his face. "It's going on the road, Aunt Mathilda. That's right. You may have forgotten it over the years, but our headquarters was originally a discarded mobile home trailer. And we need one just like this on Friday. So we have decided to put the old lady back on the road."

"You have decided, Jupe!" complained Pete, without crawling out from underneath the trailer. "Unfortunately, you didn't consider that underneath here is completely rusty!"

"But... but you can't!" Mathilda Jones had horror written all over her face.

"Why not?" asked Jupiter, unmoved.

"Because... because this thing will never move! Do you know how many decades it's been stuck here? When your uncle bought it, it was already ancient history. And even that, it was already..." She counted the fingers on her hands, but then waved them away. "—Long ago. The trailer's almost falling apart... even without you moving it!"

"You see?" Pete cried and finally crawled into the daylight. "Your aunt has put it in a nutshell. This thing is falling apart! We can't go out on the road with it! It's impossible!"

"It's not impossible," Jupe argued. "You said it yourself yesterday."

"I didn't know the crushing details then. I didn't know then that the axle suspension was completely ruined. The tyres had been so brittle for decades that they would crumble into dust just by looking at them... and that the drawbar is hanging by a thread."

“You got that axle suspension working after all. Uncle Titus promised to source for some tyres for us by tomorrow. And as for the drawbar...” Triumphantly, Jupiter lifted a long, flat Y-shaped piece of metal that he had just found at the salvage yard. “With this we can strengthen the drawbar. For the distance we are going, it will definitely hold.”

Pete looked at the piece of metal, opened his mouth to say something, closed it again, grimaced grimly and finally murmured reluctantly: “Might even work.”

“There you go. It’s gonna be okay, Pete. Trust me.”

“But—” Pete began, but then he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

It was hopeless. Jupiter had got it into his head to use Headquarters as a mobile observation post, and he was so enthusiastic about the idea that Pete and Bob ran into a wall with their arguments. Bob had earlier suggested renting a campervan instead, but Jupe had used all of their common fund to purchase the books at Hernández House. Bob and Pete had therefore immediately given up their resistance.

The boys put in a lot of effort every afternoon after school. Tunnel Two—the secret passage between Headquarters and the workshop—was disconnected. So was the phone line. To reduce the weight of the trailer, they removed anything that was heavy, including the refrigerator, computer, table, chairs, shelves of books and files, and almost the entire photo lab at the back of the trailer.

Eagerly, Jupiter set about adapting and attaching the Y-shaped piece of metal to the drawbar. Bob climbed onto the roof again. And Pete disappeared again, shaking his head under the trailer.

Would this work? Was the old lady roadworthy? The whole thing could end in a catastrophe. And then Jupiter would regret everything. Only time would tell...

The Three Investigators only had two days left. Right after school, they went to work and tinkered with the trailer until late at night. Jupiter had found some discarded headlights which were from a movie set and they still worked. With them, Headquarters were bathed in glaring light so they could work long after dark. They had stretched a large plastic sheet over the trailer to keep the rain out.

By the next evening, everything seemed to go according to plan. Pete replaced more or less the entire floor of the trailer. Jupe and Bob had the walls reinforced, cracks filled and furniture fixed. Uncle Titus had managed to find a set of tyres that had enough tread, and they fitted well. All the odds and ends were completed as well.

Headquarters now looked like a patchwork quilt. But it seemed stable—at least for the moment. Sweating and with dirty, wet clothes, Jupiter, Bob and Pete stood in the bright light of the spotlights and inspected the work.

“Looks pretty good so far,” Pete thought. “Now it’s time. If we remove the jacks, this thing will either stand on the tyres—or collapse, which means Jupe will be stoned.”

“We... we should, uh... we should operate all four jacks at the same time,” Jupiter said nervously. “So nothing breaks.”

“Ask Uncle Titus,” Bob suggested.

“Good idea,” Jupe agreed.

Titus Jones was just about to close the gate to the salvage yard. He was happy to give The Three Investigators a hand.

Each of the four stood at a corner and Jupe counted: “One, two—one, two—one, two.” Very carefully and in time they wound down the jacks. Slowly, the trailer sank to the ground. And it groaned... and crunched... and made sounds so frightening that Jupiter, Pete and Bob

expected the worst. Then the tyres touched the ground and slowly took over the weight on the jacks. The axles squeaked, the rubber of the tyres stretched, got small cracks and creaked so loudly that everyone closed their eyes in anticipation of the final bang.

Then it was over. The jacks were down, and the trailer was on its four wheels. For seconds, The Three Investigators and Uncle Titus held their breath, then everyone burst out cheering.

“Jupe, it works!” cried Pete enthusiastically. “It really works!”

“I never doubted it for a second,” Jupiter lied.

“You’ve really done quite a bit of work,” said Uncle Titus admiringly. “I am impressed.”

“Steady, steady,” Bob said. “The trailer is in place, okay. But will it move?”

“It’s best if we do a little test run right away. Bob, you’re the one with the car.”

Bob nodded. “Yeah. So?”

“Well, bring it here! Let’s try it out right now!”

It took a moment for Bob to find his voice again. “Wait a minute, my car? You’re gonna pull the trailer with my car? I got a thousand-year-old rusty Beetle, remember? It can’t even pull a wheelbarrow!”

Jupe stared at him. “Uh...”

“Plus, it doesn’t have a tow hitch.”

The First Investigator cleared his throat, blushed a little, and then turned to Pete: “Pete, your car didn’t happen to have—”

“A tow hitch? Yes, it does. But the MG is still in the shop. Thank goodness.”

Jupiter moaned and put his hands in front of his face. “This can’t be true. Why... why... why didn’t we think of this?” He turned to his uncle.

“Don’t even look at me. I need the both the car and the pickup truck tomorrow, you know, for the city festival this weekend. It’s gonna be a big turnout. And I have so much to do before then. Remember Jupe, your aunt and I are counting on you. You promised to help out on Sunday.”

“Yes, yes, all right, we’ll help,” Jupiter assured.

“And now what?” Pete asked. “How are we going to move our trailer to Solromar?”

Jupiter tapped his chin thoughtfully. “There must be a solution. There’s always a solution.” Suddenly his face lit up. “Of course! Sure, why didn’t I think of that right away!”

“What?” Bob was eager to know. “Do you know where we can get a car? One that’s strong enough to pull our monster?”

The First Investigator smiled. “Indeed, Bob, I know how.”

9. An Old Lady Gets Going

During the whole week, Rocky Beach had not seen a single ray of sunshine. But on this Friday, the thick cloud cover broke up for a short moment and plunged the coastal town for two minutes into a sea of warm light. The sun transformed the Rolls-Royce's fittings into liquid gold as the venerable vehicle approached the salvage yard area at that very moment. The black paint was polished to a high gloss as usual and some passers-by looked at the car in admiration.

The Three Investigators stood guard as the Rolls-Royce rolled into the salvage yard and stopped. Worthington, the chauffeur and also a friend of The Three Investigators, got out and let the driver's door gently shut. He was tall, even a good deal taller than Pete, and as always, impeccably dressed in a black suit. As a greeting, he briefly loosened his chauffeur's cap. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am delighted to see you again."

"The pleasure is all ours," Pete replied, trying to imitate Worthington's British accent. In return, Jupiter gave him an evil eye. But Worthington acknowledged this with a smile.

"How are you, Worthington?" Jupiter asked.

"Excellent, thank you for asking. I am in good health and due to the bad weather, business is booming. At weddings, people are currently more likely to book a Rolls-Royce with heating instead of an open horse-drawn carriage... So where would you like me to take you today?"

"Today things are a bit... uh... more complicated," Jupiter said. "We need the Rolls-Royce more as a means of transport this time."

"It's no problem at all. The boot has more volume than you might think at first glance."

"Um... it's not so much the boot," Bob said.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Didn't you gentlemen say something about transport? What are you going to transport?"

As if on command, Jupiter, Pete and Bob turned around and looked to their trailer, which was cleared of all the surrounding rubbish and was ready for departure.

There were not many moments in Worthington's life when he lost his temper. This was one of them. He made an unidentifiable sound, cleared his throat and then tried again: "That thing? I mean... your headquarters? You want me to tow it... with the Rolls-Royce? ... I mean... so..." Worthington broke off. Shocked by his loss of control, he looked at The Three Investigators. Then he tightened, pulled his cap back into place, took a deep breath and sounded almost normal again as he continued: "Excuse me, gentlemen. I have let myself go—a most improper behaviour for a chauffeur. I apologize..."

"It's okay, Worthington," Pete assured them. "How many times do you think I've let myself go these past few days?"

"It's not my Rolls-Royce, of course, but Mr Gelbert's. I'm only his employee. And as such, I have a duty to fulfil the wishes of our customers. Pulling a ten-metre trailer with a Rolls-Royce is indeed a rather unusual undertaking, but on the other hand I see no reason why I shouldn't grant your wish."

"Mr Gelbert would probably see a lot of reasons," Bob interjected.

“You may be right. But one of the reasons Mr Gelbert values me as a loyal employee is to keep him out of trouble.”

“That means you won’t tell him anything?” Bob asked.

“I see no reason to do so. It’s a ride like any other, isn’t it? Almost, anyway.” Then, for the second time today, Worthington displayed a behaviour most improper for a chauffeur—he winked at The Three Investigators.

Pete couldn’t take it anymore and put his fingers in his ears. The noise their trailer made when the Rolls-Royce slowly and carefully pulled away was frightening. It sounded like a scrap metal press crushing a car... or as if a hurricane was sweeping over a corrugated-iron hut. Another ten metres and the provisionally patched drawbar would tear apart. No, it was before that... or the axle broke... or the trailer would simply fall apart—completely... or...

When crossing the short driveway that separated the salvage yard entrance from the road, the trailer was shaking so violently that Jupiter and Bob were now also frightened and anxious. But as soon as Rolls-Royce and trailer were on the road, things proceeded more calmly. The moaning and creaking did not disappear but now sounded less threatening. And Worthington drove so carefully that Pete relaxed a bit after a while.

Whenever The Three Investigators were on the road in a Rolls-Royce, people on the street stared at the noble vehicle. The boys were already used to that. But this time, it was different. This time, the people did not just see a Rolls-Royce polished to a high gloss. They saw a Rolls-Royce polished to a high gloss, pulling a shabby, faded, dirty, dented, patched-up monster of a trailer behind it. People stopped, the drivers honked their horns and more than once someone pulled out a camera to capture the unusual sight. The drive to Solromar was the most spectacular The Three Investigators had ever experienced in a Rolls-Royce.

When Worthington finally turned into Lincoln Street, the doors of the caravans and camping trailers flew open and Mrs Lansky and her neighbours including Julianne Wallace stared at the two vehicles in disbelief.

Worthington managed to manoeuvre the trailer so that it stood perfectly on the lawn at once. While The Three Investigators, with the help of the chauffeur, separated the car and the trailer, Miss Wallace curiously approached.

“That’s what I call an entrance!” she said. “A real Rolls-Royce! With a chauffeur! I’m speechless!”

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” Worthington greeted her politely and lifted his cap.

“Good afternoon. Say, guys, did I miss something? Are you movie stars or something? Is that why you looked so familiar to me?”

“No,” replied Jupiter. “We simply had no other means of transport at our disposal.” The First Investigator realized a second too late how arrogant that sounded. Julianne Wallace raised an eyebrow disparagingly and from then on did not even look at Jupiter.

Instead, she turned to Bob for her next question: “I thought you were only staying for the weekend and you’d come with a tent.”

“It’s true about the weekend. But we thought... well...” Bob realized that none of them had come up with a convincing explanation for this spectacle. “Actually, we didn’t think anything of it. Head... I mean, the trailer had been sitting around for so long, we figured it was time to move it.”

“Well then... have fun! I hope this El Niño weather doesn’t put a damper on your plans!”

At that very moment, Pete got the first raindrop.

The sun, which had briefly appeared in the afternoon, had long since disappeared behind the thick, puffy clouds. The rain constantly pelted down on the roof of Headquarters.

Julianne Wallace had been sitting in her trailer for hours. Bob had posted a guard at the window, so he could always keep an eye on her.

"Let me guess. She's still reading," said Pete, bored as he tried to clean up the mess that the trip had caused inside Headquarters.

Bob nodded. "Or rather, she flips. There's a whole stack of books next to her, and every now and then, she picks one up and looks for something... There, now she stands up... and brings more books. My goodness, the woman has nothing else in her trailer! She could be your sister, Jupe."

"She's looking for certain information," Jupe noted, and he had squeezed himself next to Bob and risked a look through the binoculars. "I can see the titles of the books. That's what I thought! It is exclusively literature about Jaccard and Hernández! Isn't that amazing, considering she already works at Hernández House and should know everything about him. If we could just take a look at her notes that she's been making on the side..."

"Not so obvious, Jupe!" Pete warned. "If she turns around, she'll see you. And there goes the low profile tailing."

"You're right," the First Investigator agreed and lowered the binoculars. "We'd better find out what Miss Wallace is up to... what exactly, I mean. As long as there's nothing going on over there, there's not much we can do about it anyway." He rummaged through the files on the desk, looking for any notes they had on Jean-Marie Jaccard and Raúl Hernández.

"Let us recap. We know that *Fire Moon* exists and has been hidden in a secret place. The secret could only be unravelled by those who understand the clues on the tombs, at least that is what the letters say. And the clues say: 'If you have seen the world, you have already seen a lot, but you only know half the truth,' ... and 'If you have seen the last work, you have already seen a lot, but you only know half the truth.' What does that mean?"

"Surely by 'last work', you mean Jaccard's last painting, which is *Fire Moon*," Pete said. "Perhaps the painting has been torn in half and you need the other part first to... well, to see the whole truth."

Jupiter grumbled grimly. "Yes, it could be... But it's too vague for me. There must be a more concrete clue! I reread in our notes we made from the Jaccard letters. There was some mention of someone called Otto, remember? I think it was said that 'Otto is on his way to you'. Who is Otto? Maybe he's Jaccard's son?" Jupiter looked at Bob questioningly.

Bob shook his head and leafed through a book from the library. "No, his son's name is different. Wait a minute, I'm getting it... Ignace Chander Jaccard. Chander is an Indian name. Jaccard's wife was half-Indian, so that's probably why. Strangely enough, I can't get anything information about him, and he's not supposed to be that old. He's gone his own way at a young age."

"Yes, it was also written in Jaccard's letters that he did not get along well with his son. But back to Otto... Didn't you perhaps come across the name somewhere during your research, Bob? Maybe he was a mutual friend of Jaccard and Hernández."

Bob shook his head regretfully, but suddenly a thought came to him. He frowned. "Wait a minute..." He picked up another book and turned the pages. "There's something interesting here! Hernández was not only a painter, he was also a sculptor. He made sculptures, and he gave them nicknames—Marie, Sofia, Karl, Herbert, and so on."

"You mean Otto could be the nickname for a sculpture?" Pete asked.

"It's possible, Pete."

"Is there perhaps somewhere a list of these nicknames?" Jupiter asked.

“I haven’t found any. When the sculptures were finished and sold, they always had different names, such as ‘Mexican Maiden’ or ‘The Messenger’ or something.”

“But Jaccard probably knew those nicknames,” Jupiter thought. “And I bet a Hernández expert knows them too.”

Bob looked out the window. “Miss Wallace could no doubt answer our question right away... but it would blow our cover.”

“There are other Hernández experts,” Jupiter was convinced. “In the museum, for example, Julianne Wallace is certainly not the only one who knows. When she is here in her trailer, we should go back to the museum and ask someone else.”

“Tomorrow,” Pete said. “That’s when I’m gonna get my car from the shop. We’ll be stuck here until then. And the day after tomorrow, we have to go back to Rocky Beach for the city festival.” Pete sighed. “I’m beginning to doubt if all this effort with Headquarters is worth anything. We don’t even have two full days for surveillance. What do we do if nothing happens with Julianne Wallace by then?”

Neither Bob nor Jupiter knew the answer to that question.

10. In Search of Otto

The first night at Headquarters was restless. The cold crept through the walls and left The Three Investigators shivering in their sleeping bags. The wind whistled unpleasantly loud through every crack and the rain pattered incessantly on the roof.

They had divided the surveillance of Julianne Wallace into three shifts, so that one of them always sat at the window wrapped in a thick blanket and looked out into the rainy night. Around one o'clock, Julianne turned off the light. After that, nothing more happened in her trailer.

Pete, who had taken over the last shift, was glad when it began to dawn on the horizon. Though it hardly got warmer with the sunrise, the exhausting staring into the darkness had come to an end.

As soon as Bob and Jupiter were awake, the Second Investigator took a bus back to Rocky Beach to pick up his MG. However, there were problems in the garage, so it took him until the afternoon to finally get back with the repaired car.

With Julianne Wallace, nothing had happened all day. She was still crouching over her books, cooking herself something to eat in between—and that was that. Nevertheless, The Three Investigators wanted to continue their surveillance, so Bob stayed at Headquarters while Pete and Jupiter went to the museum in Oxnard in the MG.

This time, however, they did not enter Hernández House immediately, but remained standing in the drizzle, looking at the sculpture that adorned the small square in front of the museum. They had noticed it on their first visit, but had not paid it any further attention. Now they came curiously closer.

The larger-than-life figure depicted a man wearing strange-looking clothes, decorated with small animal bones, branches and leaves. His head was slightly lowered and his gaze was fixed on his outstretched palm pointing to the sky. The entire body shimmered in a matte bronze tone.

"The 'World Watcher'," Jupiter read aloud when he discovered the small sign on the base of the statue. "By Hernández, of course. Who would have thought it?"

"Somehow this guy could also be called Otto, don't you think?" Pete asked. "Rather than Sofia."

"Hopefully someone from the museum will be able to answer that," Juve said.

After Jupiter and Pete had entered Hernández House and walked through the exhibition once more, they quickly found a young man in a blue suit, strolling bored from one room to the next, guarding the exhibits, as Julianne Wallace had done two weeks ago. As a precaution, Jupiter took a look at the man's name tag this time—Brandon Myers.

"Excuse me, sir," Jupiter asked.

"Yes?" Mr Myers turned to the two detectives, obviously delighted that someone wanted to talk to him.

"We have a question regarding the sculptures made by Raúl Hernández."

"Unfortunately, we only have a handful of his sculptures here in this museum," Myers said, "but I hope I can still help you."

"We have heard that Señor Hernández gave names to his characters."

“Of course! We have the ‘Mexican Maiden’, the ‘World Watcher’ outside in the forecourt...”

“No, other names,” Pete interrupted the man. “Nicknames, so to speak—like Sofia, for example, or... Otto, perhaps.”

Brandon Myers frowned and looked from one to the other for a long time. “Otto, perhaps?” he repeated suspiciously.

Jupiter nodded. “Just as an example. Do you know anything about this?”

“Well, to be honest... I don’t really know that much about Hernández. You know, I’m still in college, so working at this museum is just a part-time job. I’m afraid I can’t help you with that.”

“But what are you talking about, Mr Myers!” a voice sounded behind them. Juve and Pete turned around.

A determined-looking middle-aged lady had approached them. She wore rimless glasses on a golden chain and had tied her hair in a strict knot. “Of course you can help the boys! You are a Hernández expert! That’s why I hired you.”

“Mrs Albright!” Brandon Myers was visibly surprised. “You must have misunderstood me. Of course, I can help them. I only meant that—” He stopped.

“Mr Myers, I’m afraid your mind was somewhere else,” said Mrs Albright, shaking her head in disapproval. Then she turned to Pete and Jupiter with a friendly smile. “So, you want to know about the nicknames Raúl Hernández gave his sculptures?”

Pete nodded.

“Well, the nicknames were actually just a joke between friends—between Jaccard and Hernández, actually... but that’s the background of it, in case you are interested... So, you want to know if there is an Otto, don’t you?”

Jupiter got confused. “Well...”

Mrs Albright smiled kindly. “There is one. The World Watcher outside in the forecourt is Otto—one of my favourite Hernández statues. Unfortunately, it is no longer intact. I was unsure from the beginning if it was a good idea to put the statue in the forecourt. I was afraid it might be damaged. And that’s exactly what happened, not even a week after its inauguration. It was regrettable, very regrettable indeed.”

Surprised, the First Investigator said: “We have just looked at the World Watcher. How is he no longer intact? We didn’t notice anything peculiar.”

“Fortunately, the damage is not visible at first glance. But when you know something is missing, the loss is still painful. Have you not yet asked yourselves why the figure is called the ‘World Watcher’?”

“Actually...” Pete started and thought for a moment. “No.”

“I presume that he should be watching the world... or a world,” Jupiter immediately said. “But that’s not as abstract as it sounds, is it? So the figure was really looking at a world when it was intact. That’s why he stares at his hand like that.”

“Very good, young man,” Mrs Albright said appreciatively. “Originally the figure was holding a bronze globe in his hand. But some hooligans have removed the globe. It was only positioned on the hand with a steel pin so it could be taken off easily. The museum management had assumed that the globe was safe because of the height it was at. Obviously, they got it wrong. The globe has not been recovered to this day... What a shame. People simply no longer have any respect for art.”

Jupiter’s heartbeat had quickened noticeably during Mrs Albright’s lecture. He could barely contain his excitement. “This is really very interesting, Mrs Albright! You’ve been very helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” she answered and smiled again. “May I ask what is there to win?”

The First Investigator frowned. “To win?”

“Yes. This is about a contest, isn’t it? On the radio, perhaps? How else could you explain that someone was here yesterday asking the exact same question? That’s why I wasn’t surprised when you asked about Otto!” She winked at them. “So what is there to win?”

Jupiter gave Pete a quick glance. Then he noticed that Brandon Myers looked at him in a most peculiar way as if Jupiter was about to reveal a great secret at any moment.

“Definitely something very valuable,” Jupiter replied without thinking about it. At the same time he looked back at Myers. “This is a game worth playing. Tell me, who was that person who asked about Otto yesterday?”

“Hmm, the man was Mexican, I think,” Mrs Albright said. “But I didn’t get that good a look at him.”

Pete swallowed. “Do you happen to remember what kind of car he was driving?”

Mrs Albright laughed. “What kind of car was he driving? No, really, I don’t know. But he was tall and wore a dark coat... And he was kind of... unfriendly. You boys are certainly nicer. I hope you win the prize. It would be too bad if that guy beat you to it.”

“We hope not!” The First Investigator quipped, with his eyes still on Brandon Myers, who kept staring at him.

11 The Cover is Blown!

Bob was bored to death. He stared out into the rain and had been watching Julianne Wallace's trailer ever since Jupiter and Pete had left for Oxnard. It was only three quarters of an hour ago, but it seemed longer to Bob. In fact, he had the feeling that he had been sitting at that window for weeks, staring at a trailer where nothing, absolutely nothing was moving.

Did this woman ever leave her dwelling at all? At the moment, she was talking on the phone, but even that was not very exciting for him. Bob had just decided to leave his observation post for a few seconds to make himself a cup of coffee, when he heard the door of Miss Wallace's trailer suddenly opened.

Julianne Wallace stepped out and walked purposefully towards the investigators' trailer. She made a very determined impression. Bob flinched from the window and looked frantically around... The desk! Everywhere were documents, notes and research results about the *Fire Moon* case! If Miss Wallace happen to glance at it, their cover would be blown. With both arms, he pushed everything on the desk into a pile and threw his blanket over it. Not a second too soon, there was a knock at the door.

Was there any more tell-tale signs lying around? No, not as far as he could tell. There was another knock. He prepared a few sentences, forgot them immediately and opened the door. "Oh, hello! This is a surprise."

"Yes, isn't it?" Julianne Wallace didn't seem the least bit pleased.

Bob took a step aside. "Why don't you come in? The weather really is too ghastly to—"

"Save it!" she cut him off. "Now I remember who you three are!"

"You, uh... what do you mean?"

"You were at Hernández House two weeks ago asking me questions! I should have thought of it right away! I don't know what this is all about, but you're up to something. So, what is going on? What do you want from me?"

"I... we... nothing," Bob lied. "This must be a coincidence! You know, you struck me as familiar as well. Now that you mention it... yes... we did meet you at the museum."

"You mean to tell me you just happened to be here?" Miss Wallace said. "I don't believe a word you say! Nobody would think of going on a camping trip in the worst weather in years! Especially not from picturesque Rocky Beach to ugly Solromar! And in a Rolls-Royce. How stupid do you think I am?"

"You know what I think? I think that there was no burglar last Tuesday. I think that you yourselves tried to get into my trailer. Unfortunately, I can't prove it, or I'd call the police right now. I warn you, if you anything try anything funny, you'll regret it. I won't let anyone get the better of me, understand? Not by three rookies like you! If you're not gone by tomorrow, I'll report you to the police. Do I make myself clear?"

Bob nodded.

"Good." Julianne Wallace sparkled at him angrily once more, then she turned around, marched back to her trailer and closed the door behind her.

When Pete and Jupiter returned an hour later, they were loaded with paper bags full of groceries.

"If you have seen the world, you have already seen a lot, but you only know half the truth," Jupiter greeted Bob, put down his bag and beamed. "Now we know what is meant by that, Bob!"

"Really?" Bob was still so shocked by Julianne's visit that he couldn't wait to hear Jupiter's news. Mechanically, he said, "What?"

"We have found Otto," Pete said and reported about their discovery at Hernández House. "Someone has stolen the globe that the World Watcher alias Otto originally held in his hands."

"And there must be something hidden in this globe," continued Jupiter. "The key to *Fire Moon*! But as the sayings on the tombstones prove, only half the truth is in the thief's hand."

"And then there's one good news and two bad news," said Pete as he unpacked the groceries and distributed it wherever there was room. "The good news is that Night Shadow is not the thief of the globe, because he asked about it himself yesterday. Bad news number one... He's still on the trail of the painting, just like us. Bad news number two... There's someone else involved—Brandon Myers. He also works at the museum, just like Julianne Wallace—and he knows something. I'm sure of it."

Bob nodded sadly. "And I have bad news number three for you."

"What happened?" Jupiter asked alarmed.

"Julianne Wallace. She was here. She remembered us being at the museum two weeks ago." Bob told his friends about the short but intense encounter.

"This is bad," Jupiter growled in frustration. "This is very bad. So I guess we can forget about spying on her. From now on, Miss Wallace will be more careful than ever." He looked out the window. Julianne Wallace had drawn her curtains. "How could she have found us out?"

"Brandon!" Pete suddenly said.

"Excuse me?" Bob asked.

"Brandon Myers! I wouldn't be surprised if he is Wallace's accomplice! Brandon called Julianne and told her about us just after we left the museum! And then it dawned on dear Julianne why we looked so familiar to her!"

"That's right, Pete!" Bob said. "Right before she came over, Julianne was on the phone!" He sighed heavily. "Well, I guess this mission is over. We blew it, guys. What are we gonna do now? One lead after another is crumbling away. I'm starting to get confused and desperate."

The First Investigator nodded slowly. "We need a new plan."

"Let's have it out," Pete demanded.

But Jupiter could think of nothing. The Three Investigators sank into thoughtful silence. There was a murmur.

"Now I can hear thunder," Bob said with a worried look out the window.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "That was my stomach."

Pete laughed out loud. "Then I would say that we should get something to eat first! After all, we nearly bought everything that the supermarket on the corner had to offer. Bob, what do you think you can do with a kilo of pasta, several jars of peanut butter, a few bags of chips, two litres of milk, a pack of frozen vegetables, six eggs, a cucumber, a bottle of ketchup, six cups of chocolate pudding, a loaf of bread, a bag of oranges and a tube of tomato paste?"

"Uh... nothing," Bob replied.

"That's exactly what I said. But Juve thinks—"

There was a knock on the door.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in surprise. "It could be Julianne again!" Bob whispered, stepped to the door and opened it.

But it wasn't Julianne Wallace who stood in front of the door in the incipient dusk, freezing and soaked, looking half outraged, half relieved.

It was Brittany.

12. Beauty or the Beast?

“So here you are! Do you have any idea how long it took me to find you?”

“Brittany!” cried Jupiter. “Where... where did you come from?”

“Well, where else? From Rocky Beach of course! But your aunt could only tell me that you’re somewhere north of the Malibu coast with the trailer. She had forgotten the name of the place. I searched the coast for hours! Fortunately, some petrol station owners could remember the highly obscure sight of a thousand-year-old mobile home trailer pulled by a black Rolls-Royce with gold-plated trimmings. What is it, can I come in or shall I continue talking in the rain?”

It took a while for Brittany’s anger to die down. Jupiter was already storming her with questions, but she took her time to wipe her hair dry.

“Can I have some tea? I’m freezing cold. The weather is a complete disaster. And this here, in supposedly so rainless California! El Niño will wipe us all out!”

“Brittany,” Jupiter said. “Could we please postpone talking about the weather until the discussion of more important issues is over? Where have you been all week? Why didn’t you get in touch? Why weren’t you at your house in the canyon?”

“You ask questions,” murmured Brittany. “What do you think? That I’m going to sit quietly at home while the police are busy uncovering everything about Hugenay? I worked for that man, remember? I didn’t want to be arrested for that.”

“But they wouldn’t have arrested you,” Bob objected. “You didn’t do anything wrong, did you?”

“Oh no? Not so long ago, you saw things differently. What about the tea?”

Bob put a tea bag in a cup and pour hot water into it. Only then did Brittany relax a little and took a seat in an armchair. “I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t know how much dust Hugenay’s arrest would raise. So I went into hiding for a few days. But the caution was unfounded, it seems... right? No one was looking for me.”

“As far as we know,” Jupiter said. “The police have other worries right now than taking care of people who once worked with Hugenay.” He in turn began to report what had happened in the past few days. But he left out some details of their investigation. He didn’t want to give Brittany too much information.

“That suits him,” said Brittany after Jupiter had finished.

“What suits him?” Jupiter asked.

“Hugenay snaps his finger and everyone starts dancing to his tune. He’s behind bars and can still manipulate the world around him.”

The First Investigator nodded gloomily. “This is exactly what I was thinking. But still we must follow his clues. We have no alternative. Unfortunately we are slowly running out of options. We have already lost the trace of the package... and Julianne Wallace will not be playing cards with us anymore.”

“The trail of the package? Oh, you didn’t lose it.”

“What?” Bob remarked. “Jupiter just told you that all we found in the search was the tracking transmitter. Someone beat us to it.”

“That’s right,” Brittany said. “And I know who...”

“What?” cried Jupiter, Pete and Bob at the same time.

“I know who dug up the package. Now don’t look so shocked. It’s not your fault that someone beat you to it. In fact, it’s mine.”

“Brittany,” Jupiter said, painstakingly controlled. “Please do not speak in riddles. Are you trying to tell us that you dug up the package?”

“No. It was Miller. He followed you on his motorcycle while you were chasing the taxi. Then when you ran into traffic, Miller just rode over the side walk, so he didn’t lose sight of the taxi. He tracked it to Hugenay’s beach house. There he lay in wait. But unlike you, he stayed up on the road when Hugenay was caught. From there he had a better view than you and could watch Hugenay hiding something. Well, he dug it up after you and the police went off and brought it to me.”

Brittany went through her backpack and slammed the package on the table. It was stained from the wet sand that it had been buried in. And it had been obviously opened. But while Bob and Pete curiously looked at it, Jupiter didn’t. He was stunned.

“You hired Miller to follow that taxi? Tell me, are you okay?”

Brittany looked at him confused. “Yeah. You’ve got a problem with it?”

“Whether I... Yes, I’ve got a problem with it!” Jupiter burst out. “Why wasn’t this discussed with us?”

“It was my personal backup plan, Jupiter. The operative word being ‘personal’. I didn’t want to check with you—plain and simple. Miller was there in case something went wrong. Not so you could rely on him. And as we’ve seen, you needed a backup plan too, because you were so close to messing it up.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Brittany, but haven’t you recently gave us a blazing speech about your mistakes?” Jupiter asked in a biting voice. “About how you wanted to make up for your past actions? ... That you are over with the games? ... That you want to be honest from now on? Not much of that is left, it seems.”

“There he goes again—the great orator, Jupiter Jones,” Brittany countered angrily. “You were wrong about me once before, Jupiter. And you are wrong this time, too. Just because I asked Miller to help us doesn’t mean I’m playing games.”

“No, you just didn’t trust us, that’s all.”

“I wanted to be on the safe side! In case you can’t imagine, it was very important for me that Hugenay be punished. I couldn’t let the plan go wrong. So I asked Miller to help me... To help us, in fact. If you’re gonna take that as suspicion, go ahead. But at least be honest with yourself and ask yourself if you’re not just offended.”

“Offended?” Jupiter gasped. “What are you talking about! Why should I be offended!”

“Because you didn’t notice that Miller was following you... Because he beat you to the package... Because he managed to stay with the taxi and you didn’t.”

“Nonsense. I just don’t want to be betrayed again,” Jupiter said. “But this is probably too hard for you to understand. You don’t even notice when you’re betraying people anymore.”

“Uh, folks...” Pete spoke tentatively. “Isn’t that something... How do you always say it, Jupe? Counter-productive?”

Jupiter fell silent. He gave Brittany another sinister look, crossed his arms and began to walk up and down the narrow trailer as far as he could.

“Well, so that no one here misunderstands me,” Bob now said, “I don’t think it’s right what Brittany did either. But you’re not supposed to cry over spilt milk or anything like that. And the bottom line is that it’s a good thing that Miller followed us and the taxi. He found the package, right? That puts us back in the game. So, Brittany, what’s in the package? You opened it, didn’t you?”

Brittany nodded silently. For a moment, she seemed to consider whether she should just take it back and leave. But then she gave herself a jolt, grabbed the package and opened it. She pulled out two folded papers, got up from her chair and spread the first one on the desk.

It was about the size of a large poster. On it was a tangle of lines drawn with a ruler, rectangular areas and hatchings.

"So they are blueprints," Bob said. "An outline of what architects use when they design a building. See, these are the different rooms, there are doors and windows drawn, and this corrugated thing is a staircase."

"You're right," Pete said. "When my mother was so intent on buying a house, she kept bringing back such plans. Only they were much smaller. This one seems like a real beauty... Three stories high." He pointed to the three different areas on the plan, which all had the same outline, but were otherwise designed differently.

"What's on the other piece of paper, Brittany?" Bob asked.

She unfolded the second sheet. It was also an outline, but this time it was a simpler version and on a larger scale. The building, which was drawn in every detail on the first plan, was now much smaller and only shown as an outline. Here, the surrounding area was shown. There was another, smaller building, which might have been a garage or a summer house, and various lines were drawn leading from there to the main building. There was also a large plot of land with flower beds, hedges and other plants, a paved path and finally the surrounding fence.

"Look, Jupe!" Bob demanded.

"I can see it," said Jupiter, who was still annoyed, and he only took a quick glance at the blueprints.

"But for what?" Pete wanted to know. "Was Hugenay planning to build a villa?"

"No," replied Jupiter. "He wanted to break into this villa—the villa where *Fire Moon* is located. So he tracked down the architect of the building and ordered Night Shadow to steal these blueprints from the architect's files."

"How do you know all this?" Bob marvelled.

"It's obvious," Jupiter calmly replied. "Using the blueprints, Hugenay wanted to work out a plan to get in."

"I had come this far, too," Brittany said coolly.

"But then we have it!" cried Pete enthusiastically. "Now we know where *Fire Moon* is hidden! Hugenay is locked up, and there's only Julianne and Night Shadow. All we must do is to inform Cotta. Tell him to put guards at this building. If the police are forewarned, they'll catch them the moment they try to steal the painting. That makes things even easier. Or no, even better—we inform the owner of the villa! Then he can take care of his treasure. No, no, now I've got it—we inform the police and the owner. Then nothing can go wrong... Or maybe we should—"

"Pete!" Jupiter interrupted him impatiently.

"Yeah?"

"Get a grip on it," Jupiter said. "You're overlooking a little problem."

"What? What problem?"

"We have no idea where this villa is or who owns it."

"Oh..."

"Yes," growled Jupiter. "You said it. Or did you find out?" he asked Brittany.

"No," Brittany replied. "There's no name, address or other reference on the blueprints."

Jupiter did not answer. Instead, he grabbed the blueprints and went to the back of the trailer, where behind one door was their crime lab. "I'll see if I can extract some more secrets

from these blueprints with our detection equipment.”

He went into the lab and closed the door. Bob and Pete looked at each other helplessly.

Bob cleared his throat. “How about we start cooking something? You’ll see, Brittany, our leader is much more sociable on a full stomach.”

Jupiter spread out the blueprints and switched on the small lamp above the laboratory table. He stared at the papers without really seeing them. It was nonsense to want to examine them. It was hardly likely that the architect had left some secret message on the blueprints in invisible ink or something like that. But he was happy to close the door behind him and be alone for a moment.

The First Investigator took a deep breath and then concentrated on the blueprints. If there was no secret ink, then perhaps he found a clue to what Hugenay was up to. This could also help him. If he managed to see through the master thief’s plan, he might be able to beat Night Shadow.

Outside the lab, there were busy clattering of dishes and cutlery and the peculiar smell of a tomato paste and peanut butter sauce was slowly spreading throughout the trailer. However, the First Investigator continued to focus on the blueprints. He noticed that all the doors and windows had strange markings that he could not interpret. It was as if the architect had planned something special there. Jupiter could not quite make sense of it. He had a hunch, but...

Someone opened the door and entered.

“Is dinner ready yet?” Jupiter asked, without turning his eyes away from the blueprints.

“In a minute.” It was Brittany, but Jupiter didn’t turn around. She came closer. When she spoke, her voice was much softer than it was half an hour ago.

“Listen, Jupiter. This may not have been the best start. We’re all tensed up. I feel like a fugitive on the run for a week, although I should be relieved that Hugenay is finally caught. And you don’t seem much different. The case is still unsolved, the painting is still in danger. But you should know that we are on the same side, Jupiter. You and I have the same goal. I know you find it hard to trust me, and I don’t blame you. I would feel the same if I were you. But I’m not the beast you want me to be. I’ve changed. And I want to keep working with you until *Fire Moon* is found. It would be nice if you could trust me. Maybe we can even become friends.”

Jupiter flinched slightly when she touched his shoulder. He didn’t know what to say.

Pete’s loud “Done!” from outside saved him.

Jupiter relaxed a little. He turned around and produced a narrow smile. “Maybe we should eat something first.”

13. A Question of Trust

The wind picked up and let the rain patter on Headquarters in irregular swaths. It whistled and pulled through the cracks of the windows and the door until Pete put some towels in front of it. Then all four of them went about their meal in silence. The sauce tasted more than strange, but hunger lowered their demands very much.

“There’s one advantage of the mess with Julianne Wallace...” said Jupiter, after wiping the last bit of sauce from the pot with the help of a piece of bread. Unfortunately, there were no more pasta. But half a cup of chocolate pudding would do for now. With pleasure, he pulled the aluminium lid off the cup and let his spoon sink into the pudding.

“We can help at the salvage yard tomorrow without a guilty conscience and then take our time to watch the city festival and the light show in Rocky Beach. We won’t worry about the blueprints and all the rest until Monday. After all, Rocky Beach does not get two hundred years old every day. We would not forgive ourselves if we spent tomorrow evening brooding over the blueprints instead of watching the show. And Aunt Mathilda will be grateful for our help.”

“I doubt she’ll really need us at the salvage yard, though,” Bob said with a glance out the window. “It’s pouring rain. And it doesn’t look like it’s going to get any better soon—quite the opposite. I can hardly imagine that tomorrow as many people will make the pilgrimage to Rocky Beach as your aunt would like.”

“So you’re not going to work on the blueprints until tomorrow?” Brittany looked it up. “Do you really think that’s a good idea? That might give Night Shadow a time advantage.”

“We’re just taking a little break,” said Jupiter. “We’ve really earned it.”

Brittany nodded silently. A little later, she stood up and put on her jacket. “Okay, boys. Thanks for the, uh, unusual meal. See you!”

“You’re leaving already?” Pete asked astonished.

“Yes, I’m afraid I must. But I’m back in that house in the canyon now. If you find out anything, you’ll get in touch with me, right? I’ll see you later.” When she opened the door, the wind blew a rain shower into Headquarters. Then Brittany was gone.

Jupiter glanced after her through the window and pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. He did that even after Bob and Pete had long since finished doing the dishes.

“So?” asked Pete as he scrubbed the pot. “What do you think?”

“About Brittany?” Bob pulled a face. “I don’t know. To tell you the truth... I don’t think she’s trying to play with us anymore. Sure, there’s still a lot of weirdness in her behaviour, but I would say, on the face of it, she was honest with us.”

Pete nodded slowly. “Seems the same to me. If she was trying to fool us, she wouldn’t have brought the blueprints, would she?”

The two looked over to Jupiter. The First Investigator had little desire to comment on the subject. But he felt the looks of his friends on the back of his neck. Finally, he sighed and murmured softly: “Perhaps you’re right.”

When the storm broke out half an hour later, Bob and Pete were still discussing whether or not they could trust Brittany. Jupiter, however, had long since dropped out of the

conversation. He hardly listened. To him, that discussion was leading nowhere. Instead, the First Investigator thoughtlessly played with the contents of a small box he had bought in the museum shop of Hernández House. It was the set used to vividly explain and demonstrate anamorphosis.

In front of Jupiter, there were a few postcards on which there were elongated splotches of paint. In the middle was a white, round circle. The First Investigator took an enclosed mirror foil, rolled it up into a cylinder and placed it on the white circle. On the postcard, of course, there were still long blobs of colour. But in the reflection on the cylinder, they were pushed together into a complex form. Suddenly, they were not just confused blobs of colour, but a real picture, in this case, a house with a colourful awning. The curvature of the reflective foil, which would have distorted a normal picture, had exactly the opposite effect here. It straightened the picture and thus made it really visible.

Jupiter smiled. That was exactly to his taste.

“What are you smiling at, Juve?” asked Pete, who had been watching the First Investigator’s actions for a while. Jupiter demonstrated the anamorphosis effect to Pete and Bob.

“Fascinating,” Bob thought. “This is very different from the painting we saw in the museum.”

“Yes. And it says in this book that there are many more ways to create an anamorphosis using reflections—not only with reflecting cylinders, but also with reflecting pyramids or cubes. I wonder...” Jupiter broke off.

“What are you wondering about?” Bob asked.

“I wonder if it wouldn’t also be possible to make an anamorphosis visible through a sphere.”

“Well, why not?” Bob said.

“A reflective sphere that at first glance might seem like a globe...” Jupiter said.

Bob and Pete looked at him in surprise.

“You mean—” Bob began to say.

““If you have seen the world, you have already seen a lot, but you only know half the truth,”” Jupiter quoted. “What if the globe of the World Watcher is much more than just a globe? What if we do not have to look for the key to the secret in the globe, but if the globe itself is the key? What if *Fire Moon* is an anamorphosis?”

14. Stuck in the Mud

That night, The Three Investigators hardly slept a wink. The wind was shaking Headquarters like a madman, and the rain was loud as hail and would not stop.

In the early hours of the morning, Bob struggled out of his sleeping bag and sat down on the seat by the window. He couldn't sleep anymore and watched the rain running down the window pane, slowly brightening the grey streaks on the horizon. He also played around with the anamorphosis set, as Jupiter had done the evening before. The three of them had been discussing Jupiter's new theory for a while, but of course it was all just speculation so far. They had no proof whatsoever.

After a while, the rain subsided a little and Bob rose from his observation post, groaning. He had to pee and now he finally had the opportunity to do so. On tiptoe, he crept past Jupiter, who twitched restlessly and muttered to himself in his sleep. When Bob opened the door, a cool breeze welcomed him, but it was very refreshing after the muff inside Headquarters. Shivering, Bob stepped outside—and sank ankle-deep in the mud of the completely sodden field.

"Arrggh!" Bob moaned and tried to get out of the mud trap and quickly find a drier spot. After three smacking steps and a jump over a huge puddle, he found refuge on a reasonably dry patch of grass. He looked down at his legs. His sneakers were ready for the washing machine or alternatively, the garbage can. Then he turned around and his gaze fell on their trailer.

Bob emitted a cry of horror. "Oh, my goodness. Jupe! Pete!" He stumbled back to the trailer, ripping open the door. "Jupe! Wake up! Pete, come on, wake up! We have to do something! Fast!"

The First Investigator jumped up and hit his head on the edge of the table. "Ouch! What's wrong? Hugenay? Have you got him?"

Only little by little did Jupiter find his way back to reality and shake off the confused dream he was having.

"Our headquarters," Bob gasped in a raspy voice. "It's horrible! Pete, Jupe, come on!"

Wide awake from the panic in Bob's voice, Pete was the faster one. He stumbled through the trailer to the door and took a step outside. "Look out!" cried Bob, but the warning came too late. Pete sank barefoot in the mud.

"Oh, boy, Bob!" he cried angrily. "You should have warned me about this? Stay inside, Jupe. It's no fun out here."

"What's going on anyway," Jupiter asked drowsily, and staggered to the door, but without stepping outside.

Bob pointed silently to the bottom of the trailer. Pete slapped his hand in front of the mouth in shock. Jupiter held on to the door frame and leaned out until he too saw the catastrophe.

Their trailer was sunk in mud up to the middle of the wheels. It was stuck like an insect to flypaper.

"That... doesn't seem to be very encouraging," Jupiter said flatly.

"I couldn't have put it better," Pete added. "Come on, Jupe, get out of there. With your weight, Headquarters is about to sink completely!"

"I beg your pardon? I may be slightly overweight, but I don't think I have contributed to this misery in any significant way. Nevertheless, we should think quickly about how to get our headquarters out of this predicament."

Pete rolled his eyes. "The more pompous you are, the worse it gets, Jupe. And on Jones's scale of flowery speech, that was a straight ten!"

The First Investigator did not react to this, but hurried to put on some clothes. Also barefoot, he finally left the trailer and stomped through the mud to his friends.

"We must hurry," Jupe said. "If we do nothing, the wheels will sink deeper and deeper."

"But what shall we do, Jupe?" Bob asked. "We can't possibly push the trailer out of the mud! We'll never make it!"

"We have to pull it out," Jupe said.

"And with what?" Pete asked.

"With your car."

"What?" Pete gasped.

"Don't look so bewildered, Pete! There's no other way!"

Pete was not convinced, but realized that there was no alternative. The Three Investigators broke out in a frenzy. Pete drove his car backwards while Jupiter and Bob dug out the mud around the wheels with their hands. Then the three of them rummaged around Headquarters until they found some old cardboard boxes that they could cut apart and put under the wheels of the trailer.

"Your great modified drawbar doesn't fit properly," Pete cried and groaned as he tried to fit the trailer coupler onto the hitch ball on his car's tow hitch.

"Why not? It worked with the Rolls-Royce, didn't it?"

"It just won't work here!" Pete yelled. "I don't know why. Give me a hand!"

With combined forces and after creating some unhealthy noises, they finally managed to lock the coupler and ball into place.

"We'll never get this thing off," Pete said.

"We don't have to for now," said Jupiter. "Let's get going!"

Pete sat down behind the wheel and started the engine, while Bob and Jupe took position behind the trailer.

"Step on the accelerator," Jupiter yelled, and Pete very gently stepped on the pedal to keep the wheels from spinning, otherwise the MG would dig itself into the soaked earth, just like the trailer. He took his foot off the pedal and felt the weight of the trailer pull him back a little. So the trailer had moved... even if it was only a few centimetres.

"Watch out, fellas!" he shouted through the open window. "I'm going to rock Headquarters! You have to push in the right rhythm! Here we go!" Pete stepped on the accelerator slowly for a few seconds—and released it. The trailer made a jerk—and slid back into its bed of mud. Then he stepped on it again and released it.

Jupiter and Bob pushed with all their might. And little by little, the trailer swayed more and more, each time rising a little further out of the mud. Jupiter and Bob were sweating with effort as they themselves sank further and further into the wet earth. Pete's hands became wet as he concentrated on the movements of the car, the rocking of the trailer and the power of the engine. Back and forth, back and forth, the trailer groaned, the engine howled, the mud splashed up. Then there was a jolt and the cardboard they had put under the wheels was pressed into the mud by the weight of the trailer. Headquarters moved forward.

"Go on!" cried Jupiter. "Go on, Pete, keep going, don't stop!"

The Second Investigator stepped on the accelerator and ignored the protesting howl of the engine. He had to take the risk of digging his car into the dirt. The car began to lurch like an angry fish on a hook. More mud splashed up and covered the trailer with a centimetre-thick brown layer. The MG and the trailer ploughed through the earth like a primeval monster, leaving a trail that immediately filled with brown water.

Then the vehicles had worked its way up to the gravel road and the wheels of the MG had its first real grip. Pete took his foot off the pedal. From now on, everything was very easy. The car pulled the trailer along the last part up to the road without any problems. The Three Investigators broke out in cheers.

“We did it!” Bob cried and wiped big chunks of mud off his legs.

“Well done, Pete!” Jupe praised and cast a satisfied glance at Headquarters.

Pete got out and sighed in relief. “My car looks like a bunch of... oh well, never mind. I hope this will teach you a lesson, Jupe! From now on, Headquarters stays where it belongs, in the salvage yard, understand?”

“Understood, Pete,” Jupiter said. “And I promise—Scout’s honour.”

The Three Investigators inspected their trailer all round. The wheels were covered with brown lumps, and the lower half of the body had a layer of mud that was dripping down everywhere. Apart from that, the old trailer was well, as far as they could tell.

Bob, who gradually freed himself from the quagmire, again felt the urge for which he had left the trailer in the first place. Now it was really time to get behind the bushes. He marched back across the field to a few bushes and disappeared behind them.

He had just zipped back his pants when he heard the ringing of a telephone. It came from Julianne Wallace’s trailer. Under the cover of the bushes, Bob crept closer to her trailer. One of the windows was half-open. Bob came within earshot just in time to catch the first words of the conversation.

“Ah, hello, Brandon... What? ... No, no, I’m already up. I was just a little confused... Oh, those three snoops just made a hell of a racket, but it’s over now. I think they’re about to go back to Rocky Beach... Oh, thank goodness. Those guys give me the creeps. I wish I knew who sent them after me... Huh? ... That’s not why you called me? Then what is it?”

Julianne Wallace’s voice had been muffled. Now it was literally exploding. “What?”

Bob flinched and almost tumbled out of cover.

“Really? We’ll need to quickly work out how to get to it! I’ll come right now! ... Yes! Of course, I know the coast road is partially flooded. I just heard it on the radio. But you should know how much this means to me... Brandon, if you’re right, it will be a big step towards finding *Fire Moon*!”

15. The Nightmare

Julianne Wallace hung up. Bob heard busy activity from her trailer. He hurried back to the road where Pete and Jupiter were unsuspectingly standing together and congratulated each other on their successful rescue operation.

“Fellas,” Bob whispered so muffled that the two of them didn’t react at first. “Fellas!”

“What is it, Bob?” Jupe asked.

“New developments!” Bob said.

“What’s up?” Pete asked.

Bob nodded discreetly to Julianne’s trailer. At that moment, the door flew open there and Julianne stormed out with her jacket over her shoulder and a pile of papers in her hand. She glanced briefly at The Three Investigators as she walked purposefully to her Jeep, which had been parked on firmer ground. She opened the door, threw the papers onto the passenger seat and got in.

“She’s going somewhere!” cried Pete, startled.

“Yes, and not only that. It’s about *Fire Moon*! I just overheard a phone conversation.”

Bob quickly reported everything he heard while Julianne Wallace started her engine, backed out and rolled onto the dirt road.

“We have to go after her!” Jupiter cried and he was already on his way to the MG.

“Hey Jupe! Wait a minute!” Pete cried. “Headquarters! We have to disconnect it first.”

Jupiter stared at his two friends for a second, ran back and the three of them immediately started tampering with the trailer connection. But the trailer coupler did not move. Something was stuck.

“I told you so,” cried Pete frantically. “Something’s not right! We’ll never get this thing off!” The three of them tried once more with their combined strength, but it was no use.

“No tools, no chance,” Bob said.

Jupe looked up the road and saw that Julianne’s car was at the end of Lincoln Street, turning around the corner to the coast road.

“There is no time to lose,” Jupiter said and ran back to the front. “We have to follow her! Let’s go!”

“With the trailer? We can’t...”

“Drive, Pete, or the entire shadowing operation would be for nothing!”

“But—” Pete objected.

“Drive!”

They got back into the car, Pete started the car and accelerated. The MG crunched and groaned protestingly, then it set off with the trailer in tow. Slowly they picked up speed. Pete felt as if he had a tonne of weights on his leg and was forced to run a marathon with them. It wasn’t him who pulled the trailer, but only his car, but he felt very sorry for his MG.

The first curve that brought them from Lincoln Street to the coast road almost became the last one. Pete took the curve so quickly that the trailer broke out like a stubborn donkey. The rear of the MG made a slide to one side.

“Woah!” Bob cried and clawed anxiously at the upholstery. “Look out, Pete!”

“Do me a favour, you two—no supervisions, okay? I’ll do my best. After all, it’s my car and my life. You just help me to keep track of Julianne’s car.”

Bob and Jupiter nodded quickly.

“Where did she go?” Pete asked.

“To the left,” said Jupiter, who had just made out the rear of the Jeep before it disappeared around the next bend. Pete took up the pursuit.

There was not much traffic on the coastal road at this early hour, which Pete was very happy about, even though Julianne might notice them much faster on an almost empty road. In fact, it would have been almost impossible to miss an MG with a monster trailer in tow.

“What do we do if she sees us?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know. Just keep enough distance, then maybe she won’t see us,” Jupiter replied unconvincingly.

“Enough distance is the least of our problems,” Pete replied.

“If we continue going uphill, we might stop and roll down backwards!”

Suddenly the sky opened its floodgates and it poured out of buckets.

“That, too,” mumbled Bob. “Pete, be careful. It’s probably even harder to manoeuvre on wet roads.”

“Bob, what did I say earlier about supervision?”

Bob kept silent.

Within a minute, the road was flooded. And Jupiter, Bob and Pete were swimming in their own sweat.

“There is one advantage,” Pete muttered and turned on the light. “Julianne has slow down.” Pete still kept so much distance from the Jeep that he could barely see its tail lights as the coast road wound its way towards Oxnard.

“But so should you,” Jupiter pointed out. “You’re a bit too fast, aren’t you?”

Pete had to agree with him. In the meantime, they were going slightly downhill. He had become faster without noticing it. The Second Investigator stepped on the brakes a little. But no matter how much the trailer had slowed the MG down earlier, it was now accelerating it. The braking hardly showed any effect. Pete started to sweat.

With the monster weighing tonnes on his neck, he had to drive carefully—very, very carefully. But how should one be careful in a car chase? Julianne Wallace’s tail lights slowly approached. They looked like two eyes floating freely in the pouring rain.

Meanwhile, the water rushed down the steep slope to the right of the road in small and large rivulets and flooded the road. The huge puddles turned into metre-high fountains as the trailer dashed through.

“At least the water is cleaning the trailer,” Bob tried a joke, but nobody laughed.

“Tell me, you’re not really slowing down, Pete, are you?” Jupiter asked timidly. “How about braking a little harder?”

Pete tried. Immediately the MG skidded a bit on the wet road, and the trailer with it. Shocked, the Second Investigator took his foot off the brake pedal. The ride became calmer again.

“Like this? Jupe, there’s no other way, okay?” Pete said. “As long as it’s downhill, the MG doesn’t pull the trailer, it’s more likely to be pushed by it! And that’s not gonna change for the time being because the next six kilometres are all downhill. We gotta hold on that long.”

The water that flowed over the road from the mountains was now earthy brown. The Jeep slowed down considerably and came closer and closer until the rain wall revealed first the

outline of the car and finally the back of Julianne's head. Then the Jeep suddenly became faster.

"She has spotted us!" cried Pete. "Now what?"

"In any case, you can't lose her!" Jupiter yelled.

Pete accelerated carefully. The curve appeared before him out of nowhere. It went sharply to the left. Instinctively, Pete braked and regretted it at the same moment. The trailer slid to the right and Pete lost control of the MG. The car swam across the road, slipped more and more to the right and inexorably approached the steep face.

"Aaaahh!" Jupiter and Bob yelled. Then the tyres regained grip and Pete was able to steer the car carefully back into the middle of the lane—for about half a second. Then the trailer behind them crashed into the steep face and made a jump into the air. The MG was thrown up a few centimetres like a bouncing ball. Bob and Jupiter knocked their heads around and watched the trailer tip to one side.

"Aaaahh!" Bob yelled, closing his eyes and ducking.

Pete did something. He stepped on it. The sudden jolt ripped the trailer back into its normal position. The body of the MG creaked alarmingly. Somewhere, something broke audibly. Headquarters swung like a cork in a storm-lashed sea... but it rolled on following the MG... on all four wheels!

"That was—" Jupiter began.

"—A roller-coaster ride!" Bob said before he burst into hysterical laughter.

"That was almost the end of us," Pete cried. "That affectionate monster! Why is it still behind us? Can't it just... fall off?"

"Relax, Pete, you're doing great, you've just saved us," Jupiter said encouragingly, but then the MG shot around a corner and the next disaster appeared before them.

Julianne Wallace overtook a slowly crawling van. Pete had no choice but to overtake as well. Luckily, no one came towards them, but the splashing water from the van completely blocked his view for a second and he raced through a wall of water. The wild honking of the MG almost drowned in the murmur of the water splashes. Thankfully, the van slowed down to let Pete overtake.

When the windscreen wipers had mastered the splashing water, Pete saw the road lying before him in a long valley. Another 500 metres and it would finally go uphill.

But just as the Second Investigator was about to breathe a sigh of relief, chaos broke out again. The steep slope on the right side started to slide. And within seconds, a piece of the mountain came loose and spilled out onto the road like a collapsing house of cards.

"A landslide!" cried Jupiter. "Pete, you have to brake!"

"But I—" Pete broke off and hit the brakes. Headquarters was not impressed in the least. It pushed the MG across the road with tonnes of force. The Second Investigator just noticed how Julianne Wallace stopped her car just before the landslide. Then suddenly the MG turned, the road slid to one side and right in front of the windscreen, the abyss yawned and behind it was the open sea. The trailer took over complete control of the MG. It slid past the MG and dragged the car backwards.

"Brake!" Bob shouted.

"What do you think I'm doing!" Pete shouted back.

Pete now no longer tried to regain control. It was simply impossible. On a bed of water, the MG and the trailer slid backwards down the road towards the steep rock face. Pete, Jupiter and Bob clawed at each other in panic and only marginally noticed how their nightmare vehicles slowly, very slowly, lost speed. Then both vehicles lined up almost at

right angles. Now it was their good fortune that the road was completely under water, otherwise Headquarters would probably have overturned.

Through the side window, Pete saw the wall of rocky earth sliding towards him. Slower, slower and slower. Then came the first piles of rubble. They made the trailer bounce and jump like a rubber ball, but also slowed it down. The noise was indescribable, when the trailer slammed against the rock face with a last leap and then got wedged. A jolt went through the MG and made The Three Investigators jump in their seats. Then they could hear the trailer coupler being detached from the tow hitch. The MG spun—and stopped less than two metres from the wall of earth.

16. Only a Legend

Pete could only hear the sound of water and blood in his ears. His heart was beating so hard that it hurt. His fingers had cramped so tightly around the steering wheel that he could hardly get them apart. He stared at the dashboard. Then at the rain-soaked window. Then at what was behind it that had once been a road. The constant rain had simply washed away part of the mountain and carried tons of debris and mud onto the road. There was no road to see anymore.

“Pete?” Jupiter’s voice struggled through the constant murmur. “Pete, are you okay?”

The Second Investigator only managed to make a throaty sound. He looked at Jupiter and was startled. Jupiter was pale like a ghost and looked so shocked that he got scared. Probably Pete himself did not offer a better sight. He looked over his shoulder. Bob stared at him with wide open eyes, but he seemed all right.

“We’re never doing this again, okay?” Bob broke the silence.

“You have my one hundred percent approval, Bob,” Jupiter said.

“And mine too!” Pete added.

They got out. The doors of the MG on one side were warped and crunched badly. On shaky legs, they walked a few steps up the road and watched the catastrophe. Ten metres down the road, Headquarters leaned on the steep face like an animal chased to death. It was a wreck—a dirty, wet, dented, cracked wreck with rugged craters everywhere from which the rainwater was running through.

A few metres away from it, in the middle of the road, stood Julianne’s Jeep, which had miraculously been missed by the projectile called Headquarters. Right next to it in the pouring rain was Julianne, white as a sheet and wet to the bone. Outright horror spoke from her eyes.

“You maniacs!” she yelled and took a step back. “You nearly killed me! Who are you? What do you want from me?” She searched her pockets and pulled out a mobile phone, but her fingers were shaking so much that she dropped it. The phone was submerged in ankle-deep water. “Damn it,” she screamed and burst into tears.

“Miss Wallace,” Jupiter said and stepped up to her.

“Don’t come near me!” she shouted.

The van they had overtaken two minutes ago came closer and stopped. A man quickly got out and walked towards them. “My goodness, what happened here? Can I... Oh, goodness... the trailer! Is anyone hurt?”

“No, everything’s fine,” said Jupiter weakly.

“Everything’s fine?” cried Miss Wallace. “Nothing is okay! Call the police! These three boys are a menace to society!”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “The police should be informed urgently because of the washed away road. And if the officers find time, they can also deal with this lady immediately.”

“Deal with me?” cried Julianne.

“Quite right,” said Jupiter. “You—the person who plans to steal the most valuable painting in the world in the near future.”

“I... what?” Miss Wallace gasped.

The driver of the van looked perplexed from Miss Wallace to The Three Investigators and back again. "What... what am I going to do?" he asked.

It took a very long time for Julianne Wallace to respond. In an almost normal voice, she said, "Please call the police and report the landslide." Then she turned to The Three Investigators and said, "And the four of us really need to talk."

After the police had cordoned off the road, the officers called a tow truck that helped The Three Investigators drag Headquarters to a car park about a hundred metres away. Pete also parked his MG there. Then The Three Investigators got into the Jeep with Julianne Wallace and drove together to Oxnard.

Brandon Myers was terrified when the four of them stood outside his door, dripping wet, muddy, freezing and still in shock.

"Julianne! For goodness' sake, what happened? Why are these three boys with you?"

"Will you let us in, Brandon?" asked Julianne Wallace.

"Why, yes, of course, come in, please! You have to get out of those wet clothes now! My goodness, you've turned blue! First I'll get some towels... and blankets. I'll also make some hot tea."

Five minutes later, The Three Investigators and Julianne Wallace were sitting in Brandon Myers's simple bachelor apartment, dry-rubbed and wrapped in woollen blankets, drinking hot tea and surrendering to the comforting warmth that slowly returned to their limbs.

"So," Julianne Wallace finally began. She spoke slowly and calmly. "Who are the three of you?"

Jupiter pulled a wet, stained card from his wallet and handed it to her. It said:



Julianne looked at the card in silence for a while, then she lowered her eyes and moaned. "Oh, my goodness. Now I realize something. I know who you are. You are the three guys who have been on Victor Hugenay's trail a few times!"

The First Investigator nodded. "That's right. And you are his former lover and later rival."

For seconds, Julianne stared at him stunned. Then she burst out laughing. "For goodness' sake! Where did you get that absurd idea?"

"From Mr Hugenay himself," Jupiter replied, irritated.

"You'll have to explain that to me in more detail!" Miss Wallace cried.

Jupiter reported on Hugenay's arrest and the visit to Rocky Beach Police Department. But he didn't mention *Fire Moon*.

Julianne Wallace shook her head silently. "Of course I heard that Victor Hugenay was arrested. But I had no idea that the three of you were behind it. What he told you, Jupiter, is... partly the truth. And some of it is outrageous nonsense."

"Then tell us your version," Jupiter asked.

Miss Wallace nodded and took a sip of tea. "The truth is... I know Victor. We were friends, back in France. And the rest... that he wanted more from me than just to be my friend... that's true as well. But when Victor gave me the stolen Hernández painting, our friendship ended. I did consider reporting him for the theft, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Eventually, I was relieved of the decision of how to deal with Victor in the future because I was coming back here to California.

"For years, I didn't hear from Victor. But one day, he suddenly appeared at my door with a bottle of wine in his hand and visited me as if we were old friends. We spent a nice evening together and he disappeared again without a trace. Since then, he has visited me regularly. He was in California many times. Another good friend of his lived here, perhaps you know her—Lydia Cartier. She passed away a few months ago, though."

"What?" Jupiter frowned. "We know Mrs Cartier from a previous case. But to our knowledge, she was Mr Hugenay's aunt, not his friend."

"His aunt? I didn't know about that. Anyway, Victor was often in the neighbourhood. And no matter how many times I changed places, he always knew where to find me. He would appear out of nowhere and then disappear without any warning.

"From the newspapers, I gradually learned about his dubious career. During his first visits, I tried to dissuade him from his raids, but it was completely hopeless. If I had called the police, he would have simply disappeared. So I resigned myself to it...

"My friend, the master thief... And as strange as it sounds, there's something connecting us. That doesn't mean that I approve of what he's doing—on the contrary. And I don't find it regrettable that he's finally caught. I always told him this would happen one day, but he just laughed at me. It's ironic that you three, of all people, should be tracking him down. He was always talking about you... or rather you, Jupiter."

Jupiter swallowed. "Talking about me?"

"Yeah. He thinks the world of you, you know. He only mentioned your friends in passing, though, otherwise I probably would have realized who you are much sooner."

Although Jupiter forced himself not to look over to Bob and Pete, he felt their looks. Probably they expected him to follow up—that he wanted to know exactly what Hugenay had said about him. But now was not the right time for that. The First Investigator cleared his throat.

"Do you know why Mr Hugenay was in California this time, Julianne?"

She shook her head. "No, I have no idea."

"He's planning to steal *Fire Moon*."

"*Fire Moon*?"

"The Last Painting by Jean-Marie Jaccard."

Julianne laughed softly. "Absurd. *Fire Moon* is only a legend. The painting doesn't exist."

"Really? Mr Hugenay let it slip that you were looking for the painting yourself... just like him."

"As I said, some of what he told you are pure nonsense."

"But you have been working very hard on Jaccard and Hernández in the last few days," Bob interjected.

"Sure. I'm working on a book about the two painters and I'm in the middle of the research." Julianne Wallace gazed from one to the other. "But of course I needed proof for all my theories."

"I've been looking for *Fire Moon* for a long time. For years, the art world said that *Fire Moon* was just a legend. It was the ridiculous dream of romantics who were desperate to believe in a last, great work by Jean-Marie Jaccard. But I had been convinced that the painting was real. So I set out to find it.

"I took a job at Hernández House, through which I have access to a lot of information. In my colleague Brandon here, I found someone who was as fascinated by *Fire Moon* as I was. For years, we gathered all the information there was. And we solved many, many, many little puzzles. But we still had no idea where the painting is. Now, I am convinced that it doesn't exist."

"Well, Mr Hugenay is convinced of its existence," Jupiter said. "Do you really think he is wrong about that? He's an art connoisseur! He knows all about painters and their work!"

"*Fire Moon* is not a question of knowledge, but a question of belief," Brandon Myers said. "There's no proof that this painting actually exists... yet, of course, many people believe it exists. But I'd be very surprised if one day it really appeared. I don't believe in the painting any more than Julianne does."

"Oh, that reminds me, one more thing might interest you," Jupiter said. "During our investigations, we found out that some letters were found a few weeks ago—letters that Jaccard wrote to Hernández shortly before his death. Unfortunately, the letters were lost again."

"Yes," Julianne said. "I had heard about the letters, but never read them because Victor had them stolen first—not to read them, but to prevent anyone else from reading them—me, to be precise.

"In fact, the reason why I was rushing to come here today was about the letters. Brandon called me as his sources just informed him that the Jaccard Society had made copies of the letters before the originals got stolen. We knew that the society had originally planned to release them to the public at a later date, but because of the theft, they have changed their minds, and would keep the copies under wraps. My guess is that they would rather not release the contents of the communication between the two painters especially when people might question the authenticity of the copies."

"As Brandon now understands, they contain no new evidence at all about the whereabouts of the painting. But I hoped they would! In any case, we wanted to discuss how we could contact the society to get a look at the copies. Any piece of information from the letters would be useful for my book."

"Oh really?" Jupiter remarked. Nobody said anything for a while.

"I'm afraid Victor's got you all wound up," Julianne finally said. "That suits him. He's a player, you know. He likes to fool people. What his real motives are, we'll probably never know. Maybe there aren't any... Maybe he just wanted to annoy you a little... to get back at you for catching him. I can't blame you for suspecting me. I'd advise you to be more careful in the future. The car chase earlier could have easily backfired. Well, I hope you learn from your mistakes."

Jupiter looked gloomily from Julianne to Brandon and back again. "Yes, you're right." Jupiter stood up. "I think we should leave now. We're really very sorry for suspecting you and putting you in danger, Miss Wallace. We will be more careful in the future. Well, Mr Myers, is our clothes done yet?"

Brandon Myers had put their wet clothes in the dryer as soon as they arrived and gave them some of his own clothes. "I'll go and check."

The boys' clothes had dried. Jupiter got his and went to the bathroom to change. There he saw Julianne's jacket—which wasn't suitable for the dryer—hung on a hanger above the

bathtub and was still dripping water. He searched the inside pockets, took something out, put it in his pocket and left the bathroom.

Bob and Pete also went into the bathroom to change.

“Thank you again, Mr Myers,” Bob finally said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Something’s wrong!” it came out of Bob as they were standing in the street waving for a taxi. “Julianne herself mentioned *Fire Moon* when she was on the phone with Brandon.”

Jupiter nodded. “I know.”

“Do you think she is really wanting to just get a look at the copies... or perhaps steal them?” Pete wondered.

“I don’t know,” Jupe replied. “But I think she’s not telling us the whole truth...”

17. 200th Anniversary Celebrations

The sight of the destroyed Headquarters was a shock. Somehow, The Three Investigators had hoped that everything would be all right—that the trailer would miraculously repair itself. But, of course, that was not the case. It was a wreck.

Jupiter had a big lump in his throat. He felt responsible for what had happened. After all, it had been him who had insisted on using Headquarters to spy on Julianne. And what had it brought them? Nothing.

Very slowly, Jupiter's bad conscience and his dejection turned into something else. Anger rose in him... but this time not at himself, but at Victor Hugenay. He was to blame for the whole misery as he had put them on Julianne's trail. That had led to the wrecking of their headquarters. Sure, Hugenay was in prison and would soon be sentenced to a just punishment. But not even that gave the First Investigator satisfaction at that moment.

He turned away in frustration. "In the next few days, I'll arrange to tow back Headquarters with Uncle Titus's pick-up truck. You two should go back to the salvage yard now. Aunt Mathilda will need your help."

"And what about you?" Pete asked with a frown.

"I'll catch up. I've got something to do."

Bob and Pete had not been pleased that Jupiter did not let them in on his plans—as usual. But the First Investigator pushed his stubbornness through. After the two had left for Rocky Beach on Pete's MG, Jupiter took a taxi to Solromar.

Julianne Wallace had not returned home yet. The door lock to her trailer was no problem for Jupiter. He had borrowed Pete's lock picks and it only took him a few seconds longer than Pete would have needed. The alarm system had no chance. Jupiter switched it off immediately with the remote control he had stolen from Julianne's jacket.

Single-mindedly, he turned to the stunted indoor plant standing in the corner. That was the first thing Jupiter saw Julianne check a few days ago after switching off the alarm.

Julianne Wallace was hiding something—Jupiter was sure of it. And he bet that he found the solution to the puzzle in this pot—a pot that seemed much too big for that puny plant.

The rain spared Rocky Beach for the rest of the day. The salvage yard was even busier than Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had hoped for.

Jupiter had arrived an hour later after Pete and Bob and had immediately joined his friends without a word about where he had been and what he had been up to. But the two of them didn't get a chance to squeeze him out of it either, as they had their hands full trying to cope with the large number of visitors. The best seller was the coffee mugs with the '200 years of Rocky Beach' print that Uncle Titus had bought cheaply, although they were brand new and not junk. Not even the cups could do without the small logo of the sponsor Pixel-Knox, but people didn't seem to mind. They almost tore the cups out of each other's hands. Ultimately, the business went better than expected."

The rest of the city was also very busy. Stalls and booths were set up everywhere. There were musical events and speeches and acrobatic performances. All of Rocky Beach was gripped by the fever of the 200th anniversary celebrations.

Nevertheless, a strange atmosphere prevailed. When The Three Investigators set off to watch the light show in the early evening after the gates to the salvage yard had closed, all three felt a gnawing unease. There was a tension over the city like before a thunderstorm. Dark, heavy clouds still raced across the sky and covered the city with twilight. It was windy and cold. The cars, which had been moving slowly through the city like streams of lava just an hour ago, had deserted the streets. The people only moved on foot. They all had the same goal—to get to one of the viewing areas from which the light spectacle could be best seen.

“Strange,” Pete murmured, crossing his arms, shivering.

“What do you think?” Bob asked.

“Everything. The city, the people, the weather. I’ve never seen it so crowded in Rocky Beach. I feel like we’re walking through a parallel world right now.”

“I’m not really getting anything,” Bob confessed. “This day has been just too much for me—all this excitement this morning, working in the salvage yard and then Headquarters! I wonder if we’ll ever be able to fix it. What do you think, Jupe? Jupe?”

The First Investigator had been immersed in thoughtful silence since they had left the salvage yard. “I don’t know,” he murmured absently, but Bob wasn’t even sure if Jupiter had listened to him at all.

They reached a small plateau in the mountains at the edge of the city. Normally it was a big car park, but today, hundreds of people converged at this place and looked down to Rocky Beach, which already offered an impressive sight under the dramatic cloud mountains, even without a light show. At the edge of the place, huge loudspeakers and a big screen were set up, on which a big ‘200’ was projected. Underneath it, the Pixel-Knox logo could be seen.

More and more people came until the square was completely overcrowded. The darkness of the evening descended in a rush over the coast. Jupiter, Pete and Bob constantly looked at their watches. At eight o’clock, it should start... Five more minutes... Two more minutes... And then it was time.

A bluish light suddenly glowed over the roofs of the city. At the same time, the large loudspeakers boomed the dramatic prelude to an orchestral piece that had been composed especially for the occasion—*The Rocky Beach Symphony*. On the screen, they could see an orchestra playing the symphony live on a stage at the beach.

Since the light show could be seen from all over the city and the surrounding area, a regional radio station broadcast the music for all those who did not want to make the trip to the beach or to one of the loudspeaker-equipped viewing areas. Tens of thousands of people throughout the region had turned up the same radio station to full volume at that moment.

After the first dramatic prelude, the music became a little quieter and the blue glow disappeared. The echo from the countless speakers all over the city sounded so eerily that Jupe, Pete and Bob got goose bumps.

A second later, their mouths were opened in amazement. In all the streets of Rocky Beach, from the slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains to the sea, little yellow lights were shining. They pulsed and flickered like camp fires. The Three Investigators had seen their town from this perspective hundreds of times, but it was the very first time they saw it with this unreal, magical light.

The houses were only silhouettes against the pulsating, yellow lights, dancing around like fireflies in a forest of stone and concrete. The lights became brighter and darker to the beat of the music coming from all the houses. And as the strings of the orchestra became louder and

more haunting, the light changed as well. The rich yellow turned into a brilliant white, which was gradually joined by bright blue. Then the music slowly became more and more rhythmic and the position of the lights changed. They were no longer hidden in the streets, but illuminated individual buildings directly. From the black sea of houses on Rocky Beach, individual buildings stood out in cold blue and fiery red. The spotlights swung left and right, back and forth. The swaying shadows created the illusion that the buildings were moving. They seemed to dance to the music.

Speechless with fascination, The Three Investigators and hundreds of other people stood on the square and enthusiastically followed the show.

"This is just crazy!" Pete exclaimed. "Man, am I glad we're here and not missing this! There's something good about this day after all!"

"I too would have hated to miss this spectacle," Jupiter agreed.

After a while, the houses stopped dancing. Now colourful carpets of light spread out in the streets and waved back and forth in waves like a coloured ocean.

"Look!" Bob cried and pointed to the big screen. The screen was no longer showing the orchestra, but camera pictures from a helicopter. It was circling over the city, filming the light show from the air. It was even more impressive from a bird's eye view.

With particularly spectacular patterns and colours, an enthusiastic murmur went through the crowd. There were trembling, bouncing dots of light, towers of light, floating spheres of light and huge landscapes of light, and the whole of Rocky Beach was part of this staging.

Then the show suddenly spread to the sea. An astonished 'Ah!' and 'Oh!' went through the crowd, when suddenly the buoys outside on the Pacific Ocean seemed to catch fire and were integrated into the play of light and colours. Hundreds or even thousands of onlookers had also gathered at sea. Their ships and boats were illuminated by the floodlights on the water and shouts of enthusiasm echoed from the sea and the beach across the city. Spotlights had also been erected on Knox Island, which bathed the rocky island and Knox Villa in mystical light. It almost looked as if the Pacific Ocean itself was glowing around the island, as if a rock rose from a sea of fiery red lava and a glacier of blue ice.

Jupiter took a look at the screen to see this wonderful scene from above. The helicopter pointed its camera at Knox Villa at that moment.

For a moment or two, Jupiter could not believe his eyes. What he saw took his breath away. Was that really it? He pushed Bob's elbow roughly to the side without turning his gaze away from the screen.

"Ouch," Bob said.

"Bob! Pete! Look! Do you see that?" Juve yelled.

The two of them, who had not been looking at the screen, as the reality was much more impressive, followed his gaze. Immediately, they understood what Juve meant.

"I don't believe it!" gasped Bob. "This... This is... Can that be it?"

"I don't believe it!" cried Pete.

"Shhh!" Jupiter said. "We don't have to alert the whole of Rocky Beach!" But the First Investigator's concern was unfounded. Absolutely no one paid any attention to them. Everyone was far too absorbed by the show.

"Knox Villa!" Pete gasped. "I've never seen that place from above! It looks just like—"

"—Like that in Hugenay's blueprints!" Bob finished the sentence. "That's unbelievable! But that means that—"

"—Hugenay was planning to break into Knox Villa," continued Jupiter. His brain was running at full speed. "That has to be it! *Fire Moon* is in Knox Villa! We must do something, fellas!"

“In five minutes, okay?” Pete asked. “I think it’s time for the grand finale.”

The Second Investigator was right. The Rocky Beach Symphony had reached dramatic heights. And in the meantime, all the spotlights and lamps that had been installed in the city were in use alternately. Added to this were bright white strobe flashes that lit up the sky and burned the silhouette of the entire coastline onto the retina. The low-hanging clouds glowed in the colourful reflection of the light show and almost seemed to reflect it. It was a breathtaking sight.

Then the music increased once more, the brass roared, the strings made the air vibrate, and Rocky Beach shone to thundering drum beats in all the colours of the rainbow. The light became brighter and brighter, the music louder and louder—and suddenly there was a loud bang! The lights went out suddenly and the music stopped. It echoed from the surrounding speakers for a few seconds, and then it was dead quiet.

Rocky Beach was in pitch darkness, and within three or four seconds, the lights beyond the city limits went out. Santa Monica, whose reflection could normally be seen from here, sank into darkness, as if someone had simply turned off the lights of the whole city.

18. In League with the Devil

A murmur went through the crowd. For a moment, many people believed that the sudden darkness and silence were part of the show, but as time passed, the clearer the real reason became.

“Power outage,” said Jupiter, and a dark premonition rose in him.

“Power outage?” Bob wondered. “Do you think they used up too much juice with their show and now a fuse blew somewhere?”

“Looks that way,” said Pete. He didn’t quite know whether he should be disappointed that the grand finale had been interrupted in the middle of it, or whether he thought it was rather funny.

People were getting louder around them. Some were angry, some were amused, others were afraid of the sudden darkness. In fact, there was no light at all, neither through the street lamps nor from the windows of the houses. No flashy advertising worked anymore, no public building was lit up, nothing. Only two or three pairs of headlights from cars driving around down in the city wandered through the darkness. Even the sky, which normally reflected an enormous amount of light from the densely populated coastal towns, was dark.

“Looks like Rocky Beach has really overdid it,” a man near them said and laughed. “Anyway, the show is over. Let’s all go home.”

“Good idea,” said Pete after the man was out of earshot. “Let’s go.”

Jupiter was completely frozen. As the crowd around him slowly dissolved, he looked down only to the darkness under which Rocky Beach lay buried. His dark foreboding slowly condensed into a tangible certainty.

“Jupe, what’s wrong with you?” Pete asked anxiously. “It’s just a power outage! It happens!”

“Just one—” Jupe raised and then lowered his voice to a soft murmur. “Just a power outage? Like the one more than two weeks ago when the administration building exploded? Do you remember? The power went out that night as well. And through Brittany, we learned that that was the actual purpose of the explosion.”

Bob and Pete looked at him without understanding. “What are you getting at, Jupe?”

—“The fact that the substation was down because of the explosion... The fact that a little later, the news said there were problems with the power supply for the light show... The fact that huge amounts of electricity were flowing through the lines today, which eventually collapsed. And since Rocky Beach’s power grid was already under greater strain than usual due to the failure of that electrical substation, one power distributor after another failed tonight. That was a chain reaction that paralyzed the entire region.”

“But this happens all the time, Jupe,” Pete said reassuringly. “It has to do with the distribution of energy in the country, I think. It doesn’t happen in Europe—they’ve moved on. I saw it on TV once.”

“Pete!” Jupiter interrupted him forcefully. “What I want to say is that this outage is not an accident! It was planned. And the course for this incident was set two and a half weeks ago by Hugenay and his henchman, Night Shadow!”

“You... you mean today’s outage was planned all along?” cried Bob.

“Exactly, Bob. It wasn’t then that Hugenay needed a power outage, it is now! To steal the painting! That was his plan from the start! He was going to strike tonight!”

Pete opened his eyes. “I don’t believe it! What are we gonna do? Hugenay is out of action, but Night Shadow...”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Jupiter interrupted him and turned around abruptly. He marched across the car park towards Rocky Beach.

“Jupe! Where are you going?” Pete asked.

But the First Investigator did not answer, but continued his way unperturbed to the centre of Rocky Beach. His friends hurried to follow him.

The people moved in broad streams across the streets back to their houses. Those who had come from further away and had found their car in the darkness, crept across the streets at walking pace because of the lack of street lighting. It soon became clear to everyone that they could not even go to a pub or restaurant after the show as planned. Because of the power outage, everything was closed. So the streets emptied very fast and behind the windows of the houses, candles started to flicker.

“Pretty scary,” Pete thought. “Just like the Middle Ages. I wonder how long it’ll take them to turn the power back on.”

“This may take a while,” Bob replied. “A few hours... Maybe all night.”

Five minutes later, Jupiter headed purposefully towards the Rocky Beach Police Department. Unlike all other buildings in the city, it was illuminated. The First Investigator breathed a sigh of relief. The police seemed to have an emergency generator. Naturally. He guessed that he was worried for nothing.

“What are you up to?” Bob asked.

“We will pay a brief visit to Inspector Cotta. Perhaps he can tell us something about the outage.”

The Three Investigators entered the foyer. There was dead silence. A young officer, who looked familiar to The Three Investigators, was sitting alone at a desk and looked up as they approached. “I’m sorry, boys, but if you want to ask about the outage, I don’t know anything for sure.”

“Why is it so quiet here?” Pete wondered.

“Without electricity, the phones don’t work either,” the man explained. Now Jupiter recognized him. He was the same man who had disturbed Cotta in their conversation about Hugenay.

“We’d like to see Inspector Cotta,” Jupiter said. “Is he in?”

A restless flicker flitted across the young policeman’s face as if he was afraid of something. Then he had himself under control again. “You’re those detective boys, right? No, I’m afraid the inspector is not here. Actually, there’s nobody else here, I’m the only one.”

“Then I’m sure your colleagues are all out because of the power outage? Strange, we haven’t met a single policeman on the streets checking on the situation.”

“Uh, no. I mean, yes, of course they’re all out. But... elsewhere.”

Jupiter’s dark intuition returned with power. “Did you just say you’re all alone here at the station?”

“Yes, but I really don’t have time now. I—”

“Yes, you are overloaded with work, I can see that,” Pete said so softly that the man could not hear him.

“You really mean all alone?” Jupiter gasped. “What about the staff that is guarding Mr Hugenay?”

The policeman cleared his throat loudly and became pale. “Mr who?”

“Mr Hugenay. You don’t have to pretend. I know he’s here. Inspector Cotta even let me see him a week ago. I’m sure you know about that.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, sure,” the policeman said. “Of course. Sure.”

“Sir?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you so nervous? There’s nothing wrong with Mr Hugenay, is there?” Jupiter continued to probe.

“Of course not. What should be wrong?”

“The power outage didn’t by any chance affect the electronic lock on Hugenay’s cell?”

The policeman got even paler. Then it gushed out of him like a waterfall: “We hadn’t even noticed it at first! We were all so irritated by the power outage. And there were only a few people here anyway, because everyone else had been called away for security at the city festival. The emergency generator started after a couple of seconds, but somehow... somehow...”

“Somehow what?” Jupiter followed up in a husky voice.

“Somehow those few seconds must have been enough!”

“Enough for what?”

“For Hugenay! To pick the lock! It is a mystery to me how he escaped... in so short a time. He must have known that the power would fail. It’s like he was in league with the devil. Somehow he knew.”

*To be continued in
Part III: The Night of Shadows.*